

Chapter 20. Local Government

20.1 Local Government and the Climate Act

Local governments in every region of the State—small, large, urban, rural, and suburban—are taking significant action in ways that contribute directly to meeting the requirements and goals of the Climate Act. Local governments are well-positioned to have a far-reaching impact on community action. State programs that partner with communities and local governments are helping drive rapid adoption and widespread participation and can have a big impact.

Partnership with local governments is a keystone of the State’s clean energy, adaptation and resilience, and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions mitigation strategies. Support for local efforts will help ensure access to the benefits of these actions for all New Yorkers, particularly those in Disadvantaged Communities who have suffered disproportionately from negative impacts of past decisions.

Municipalities and other local government entities, including industrial development agencies, local development corporations, and special purpose districts, have an important role to play in meeting Climate Act mandates. They enact codes, develop projects, adopt policies, and regulate land use, all of which are critical to supporting all members of the community in moving toward a more energy-efficient future. They also control assets like street lighting systems, wastewater treatment plants, landfills, and public transit systems. By implementing energy efficiency measures and choosing clean sources of energy for their own facilities and operations, municipalities reduce overall GHG emissions and pave the way for broader adoption of such measures. They enact codes, develop projects, adopt policies, and regulate land use. When communities lead by example, clean energy, energy efficiency, and sustainability are more likely to be priorities for residents, businesses, and institutions.

In developing the following recommendations, several discussion sessions were held with local officials from across the State to gather input. A number of important themes emerged from these discussions. Counties and regional organizations have important roles as leaders and conveners in efforts to address GHG emissions mitigation. Many local governments are motivated by a desire to achieve cost savings that come from energy efficiency in municipal operations and facilities but are constrained in action. State funding could address existing limitations in technical assistance, incentives, and resources provided to local governments for GHG mitigation. Local governments are increasingly engaged in providing education and training, outreach, and technical assistance. Local governments also face challenges with aging infrastructure and housing stock. They also identified the need for uniformly applied State mandates in accelerating change at the local level and reducing competition between local governments

and between regions. Finally, local government leaders stressed the importance of considering the differing needs of municipalities, based on geographic location, population size, and density, to support meeting Climate Act requirements.

State programs, including Clean Energy Communities and Climate Smart Communities, were identified as providing value to local governments, whether through grants, free technical assistance, or recognition for local leadership. The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) Clean Energy Communities program creates a clear path forward for communities to implement clean energy actions that have the greatest potential for impact. To date, 809 communities, representing more than 18 million New Yorkers, have completed more than 3,200 high-impact actions. These actions empower the constituents of participating communities to choose clean and efficient energy as part of their everyday lives. The Climate Smart Communities program is led by New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) in partnership with six other State agencies: NYSERDA, New York Power Authority (NYPA), New York State Department of State (DOS), New York State Department of Health (DOH), New York State Department of Transportation (DOT), and New York State Department of Public Service (DPS). Started in 2009, the program provides guidance, and financial and technical support to local governments to take locally driven climate action. The first step in the certification process is to register by pledging to reduce GHG emissions and adapt to climate change. To date, over 360 municipalities have committed to taking action on climate change by passing the Climate Smart Communities pledge, and over 100 communities have achieved Climate Smart Communities certification by going beyond the pledge and documenting accomplishments.

These programs are supported by a statewide coordinator network consisting of regional planning and development boards, associations, and councils, like the Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board and the Genesee/Finger Lakes Regional Planning Council. These organizations have long-standing relationships with local governments in their regions, and State programs can leverage those relationships for the benefit of the programs. These coordinators are trusted local partners to the government officials and staff in their regions. In addition to free, on-demand technical support, State programs offer online toolkits that include step-by-step guides, calculators, case studies, and model language that communities can incorporate into legislation.

20.2 Key Strategies to Support Local Climate Action

There are five key strategies highlighted in this sector, as shown in Table 20.

Table 20. Local Government Sector Key Strategies

Strategies
LG1. Establish Community Greenhouse Gas Dashboard
LG2. Develop Local Energy Policies
LG3. Provide Clean Energy Siting Support for Local Governments
LG4. Promote Municipal Leadership to Support Clean Energy Adoption
LG5. Provide State Support and Guidance

LG1. Establish Community Greenhouse Gas Dashboard

One strategy for supporting local climate action is to develop a statewide dashboard of community GHG emissions inventories to promote local climate action planning, monitor equity considerations, measure progress, and ensure data consistency at the county and municipal levels.

This strategy calls for a community dashboard that local governments and other stakeholders can use to understand GHG emissions, energy use trends, and identify opportunities for improvement. The dashboard would bring together data from several sources to describe the complete community GHG emissions picture, including government facilities as well as residential, commercial, and industrial emissions.

The dashboard must be easy to use and provide good, actionable information that local government officials and staff and community stakeholders can use to inform decision-making at the local level. Not all required data are currently reported at the county, city, town, and village levels. The process could establish data-reporting requirements in a manner similar to the PSC requirement that electricity and natural gas consumption data be reported by utilities (see PSC “Order Adopting the Utility Energy Registry” in Case 17-M-0315 issued April 20, 2018). The dashboard could include data on energy production and actions that reduce GHG emissions.

Components of the Strategy

- **Form a community GHG working group:** NYSERDA and DEC should establish a Community GHG Working Group consisting, as appropriate, of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), utilities, State agencies, academic institutions, consultants, labor representation, community benefit organizations, and regional and municipal officials. The group may consider several activities:

- Review existing guidance including the International Council for Local Environmental Initiative’s U.S. Community Protocol for Accounting and Reporting of Greenhouse Gas Emissions to identify methods
 - Identify and secure New York-specific data needed to complete the emission inventories
 - Develop standards for local community GHG emissions inventories
- **Support modernization of GHG emission accounting to facilitate data accessibility:** NYSERDA should incentivize software developers to create new software and other tools that allow for clear and transparent accounting of GHG emissions to inform and support local climate action. These tools should include considerations for the emissions accounting methodology required by the Climate Act.
 - **Launch the community dashboard:** NYSERDA, working with DEC and community stakeholders, should launch and maintain the dashboard, ensuring that GHG emissions inventory information is accessible to all communities in a manner that ensures data security and protects privacy.

LG2. Develop Local Energy Policies

Local government plays a critical role in enabling and promoting energy efficiency in our communities. This strategy is intended to encourage and support local governments to demonstrate leadership in energy efficiency by developing model above-minimum energy conservation codes and construction policies. This includes adopting the NYStretch Energy Code and promoting its adoption, enhanced code enforcement including streamlined permitting, third-party inspections, and shared enforcement, and Property Assessed Clean Energy financing.

Many local governments, especially small, resource-constrained communities, struggle with tight budgets and limited staff capacity, which limits their ability to take local climate actions. State programs, like Clean Energy Communities and Climate Smart Communities, that offer clear guidance, grants, technical assistance, and recognition can motivate communities to take local climate action and demonstrate climate leadership with a focus on equity.

Components of the Strategy

- **Leverage existing NYSERDA and DEC programs:** NYSERDA and DEC should continue to update the Clean Energy Communities and Climate Smart Communities programs to encourage adoption of emerging local energy policies and pro-active climate action.

- **Expand NYPA Clean Energy Services Program:** New York Power Authority (NYPA) should continue the existing Clean Energy Services program and expand the program to reach more communities.
- **Expand the regional coordinator network:** NYSERDA and DEC should expand the type of services offered by the regional coordinator network to enhance and strengthen assistance to local governments and related entities across a range of climate actions. This expansion should increase support to small, resource-constrained, and underserved communities.

LG3. Provide Clean Energy Siting Support for Local Governments

This strategy facilitates clean energy siting through development and promotion of model local laws and streamlined permitting. Local governments often have limited capacity to anticipate and plan for renewable energy and energy storage development in their communities. Similar to the previous strategy, programs like Clean Energy Communities and Climate Smart Communities that offer clear guidance, grants, technical assistance, and recognition can motivate communities to adopt appropriate siting policies at the local level. This strategy has similar components as those presented in *Chapter 13. Electricity* (Strategy E4) and *Chapter 19. Land Use* (Strategy LU8).

Components of the Strategy

- **Create model local laws and regulations:** NYSERDA, DEC, and DOS should work with community stakeholders and the clean energy industry to develop and promote model local laws and development regulations through the Clean Energy Communities and Climate Smart Communities programs. These model local laws and development regulations should minimize the impact of clean energy siting on forests and agricultural lands, as well as consider co-locational opportunities for agriculture and renewable energy generation.
- **Promote New York State Solar Permit Adoption:** Within one year, NYSERDA and DOS should work with code enforcement officers to promote local adoption of the New York State Solar Permit and other local actions to streamline the permitting process for clean energy technologies, including energy storage, at a variety of scales.

LG4. Promote Municipal Leadership to Support Clean Energy Adoption

This strategy connects homes, businesses, and community institutions with clean energy products and services through Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) programs, microgrids, district systems, and community-scale campaigns to encourage adoption of innovative technologies to generate savings and reduce GHG emissions for consumers in an equitable manner.

To achieve Climate Act mandates, broad-based consumer demand for clean energy products and services is necessary. Communities have tremendous capacity to use bulk purchasing, shared-services, community campaigns, and other forms of aggregation to drive this demand to new heights. This strategy calls for State programs to encourage local governments to adopt policies aimed at the widespread deployment of clean distributed energy resources (DERs). The intent is to allow more consumers to participate in the energy markets in ways that advance Climate Act goals and requirements while improving project economics, saving money, and generating new sources of revenue and ownership for consumers.

This strategy also calls for State programs to support policies, including CCA, which is a local program to purchase power in bulk for virtually all homes and small businesses in a participating community. CCA allows local elected officials to choose the source of energy for their communities. Most communities that have implemented CCA procure 100% renewable energy as their default supply. Many CCA programs are working to capture the economic benefits of clean energy more broadly. Several CCAs are in operation in New York State and have developed opportunities around opt-out community solar, energy efficiency, heat pumps, electric vehicles (EVs), demand response, and energy storage.

Components of the Strategy

- **Encourage the adoption of clean technologies:** NYSERDA should work with community stakeholders to promote community-scale campaigns to encourage the adoption of clean technologies to generate value and savings for consumers.
- **Expand workforce development for the clean energy economy:** NYSERDA, in collaboration with unions and the clean energy industry, should expand workforce development programs focused on training and job placement in clean energy and emerging technologies.

LG5. Provide State Support and Guidance

This strategy discusses continuing and expanding program opportunities, incentives, technical assistance, financial support, and centralized procurement services to motivate local governments, local government municipal bodies such as Conservation Advisory Committees and Environmental Management Councils, and related public entities to improve assets they control with high-impact actions. This includes LED lighting, energy efficiency upgrades, heat pump projects, methane recovery for energy production from wastewater treatment and landfills, solar on municipal premises, and municipal and school district fleet electrification.

Local governments and related public entities could realize greater savings while also achieving significant GHG reductions if they worked through shared services models. Shared services can come in different forms. For example, to accelerate adoption of clean technologies and policies, local governments may be encouraged to work together through intermunicipal conference calls, planning institutes, roundtables, or work groups. State programs that offer clear guidance, grants, technical assistance, and recognition can motivate local governments and related public entities to improve the assets they control.

Components of the Strategy

- **Encourage energy benchmarking:** NYSERDA should encourage local governments to track and report the energy use of municipal buildings and facilities (benchmarking).
- **Encourage energy efficiency:** NYSERDA should work with community stakeholders to provide technical support to help local governments and related public entities reduce energy use and GHG emissions of buildings and operations through aggressive energy efficiency measures, including, but not limited to, weatherization.
- **Provide technical support for clean energy projects:** NYSERDA should work with community stakeholders to provide technical support to help local governments and related public entities develop and implement clean energy projects.
- **Reduce grid interconnection costs:** NYSERDA, in collaboration with the clean energy industry, should evaluate options to reduce interconnection costs for municipally owned priority sites.
- **Prioritize methane recovery:** NYSERDA, working with community stakeholders, should prioritize funding for projects that recover methane from wastewater treatment and landfills for on-site energy production in a manner consistent with the strategies in *Chapter 16. Waste* (Strategy W4 and Strategy W9).
- **Support direct energy purchasing:** NYSERDA and DPS should develop tools and resources to help municipalities procure energy and enable direct purchases of energy by municipalities from the wholesale market.
- **Support fleet electrification:** NYSERDA and DEC should support electrification of municipal and school district fleets while increasing fleet-wide fuel economy.
- **Support building electrification:** NYSERDA should provide policy guidance and financial support to municipalities that adopt building electrification and energy efficiency policies that incorporate insights from cities like Ithaca that have made ambitious commitments and developed innovative decarbonization plans.

- **Increase recycling and reduce waste:** DEC should seek to increase waste reduction and recycling rates in municipal operations and in the community (see also *Chapter 16. Waste Strategy W1, Strategy W2, and Strategy W8*).
- **Support intermunicipal planning and coordination on cross-boundary issues:** NYSERDA, DEC, and DOS should encourage intermunicipal coordination and planning on cross-boundary issues while easing access to funding opportunities without penalizing Disadvantaged Communities that may not have similar partnerships in place.
- **Support capacity-building for local governments and related public entities:** The State should provide educational materials and training to local governments and related public entities, so that they understand what resources are available to them and are prepared to receive funding.