

Women Mayors Lead the Charge on Climate Change

The worldwide alliance of major-city mayors who believe their cities must take the lead on climate change, with or without their national governments' help

by Andrea Cooper, special to *Utne Reader*

CLOVER MOORE KNOWS how it feels to want action on climate change when her state and national governments aren't exactly supportive.

Moore, the lord mayor of Sydney, Australia, has seen six Australian prime ministers and seven state premiers come to power since she was first elected mayor in 2004. There's been a "profound, even hostile, lack of long-term leadership on climate change" from key state and national legislators, she maintains. Her sense of urgency is fueled by research that suggests Sydney could be as much as 4.8 degrees Celsius hotter by 2070, triggering more extreme heat waves, flooding and storms in the popular tourist destination.

So Moore and her city decided to act on their own.

They created the Sustainable Sydney 2030 plan, drawing upon ideas from residents and businesses for the city's environmental and economic well-being. Sydney has improved standards for greater energy efficiency in government buildings, developed bike lanes for cyclists to reduce car use, and switched to energy-saving LEDs for

its street and park lights. City leaders established a "better buildings" partnership with the owners of more than half the commercial office space in the city center. Members have saved \$36 million a year in electricity costs and reduced their emissions by 45 percent since 2006, Moore says.

The results could be a model for U.S. cities at a time when the U.S. president has called climate change a hoax. In Sydney, greenhouse gas emissions are down by 19 percent. Within city offices and functions, they are down 27 percent. The local economy has expanded by 37 percent during the same period.

Moore is part of a worldwide alliance of major-city mayors who believe their cities must take the lead on climate change, with or without their national governments' help. The C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group is a network of 90 megacities, representing more than 650 million residents, that develops research, calls attention to opportunities, and shares what works and could be duplicated elsewhere. U.S. cities involved include Boston, New



Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo



Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau



Lord Mayor of Sydney, Clover Moore



Madrid Mayor Manuela Carmena



Rome Mayor Virginia Raggi



Yokohama Mayor Fumiko Hayashi

York, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

This may be a break-out year especially for women mayors in the movement. Anne Hidalgo, the first woman mayor of Paris, was recently elected C40 Chair. In December, she and other C40 mayors launched Women4Climate, an initiative to bolster female leaders worldwide in the climate fight.

Women may have an especially high stake in repairing the planet. Women and children are 14 times more likely than men to die during a disaster, according to the United Nations. Poor women and children may live in places vulnerable to landslides or flooding, and can lack easy access

to emergency information. Climate change can also affect the availability of food, which hits women harder if they eat less to save more for their children or elderly relatives.

Of course, women are more than victims of climate; they are also agents of change. There's evidence women are more likely than men to act in climate-friendly ways in their daily lives, from conserving water to arranging carpools. As leaders, they are "absolutely central to the progress made in recent years on tackling climate change globally," says Hidalgo. She points to a group of women led by U.N. Secretary Christiana Figueres who were "the true architects" of the Paris Agreement, in which 196 nations pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. "At



PHOTO COURTESY AFP/C40



Warsaw Mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz



Stockholm Mayor Karin Wanngård



Mayor of Cape Town, Patricia de Lille

the height of the negotiations, an inspiring group of women mayors”—from Stockholm, Cape Town, Madrid and elsewhere—“joined me in Paris City Hall, to act together against climate change, pushing nations to reach an ambitious agreement.”

“When I’m with my fellow mayors, we frequently talk about how we don’t have the luxury to succumb to political gridlock,” Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser said at a Women4Climate press conference. “There’s no partisan way to collect the trash or move the traffic. Our residents expect us to deliver every single day, and that includes how we protect our environment.”

Women4Climate will invite top female leaders to mentor other women working on local climate projects. The idea is to enhance the knowledge and ability of younger women in city governments and non-profits, not to

mention strengthening their resolve. “Women still have to fight societal, personal and attitudinal barriers to get opportunities and have influence,” Moore says. Climate change will probably require collaboration among unlikely partners, “and there’s evidence to suggest women seem to operate more naturally in this way. ... It’s a fantastic time for women to seize the opportunity.”

Mayors may have an advantage in making progress on climate because of the inherently practical nature of their work. “When I’m with my fellow mayors, we frequently talk about how we don’t have the luxury to succumb to political gridlock,” Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser said at a Women4Climate press conference. “There’s no partisan way to collect the trash or move the traffic. Our residents expect us to deliver every single day, and that includes how we protect our environment.”

Cities led by women have already been bold leaders on climate, Moore argues. Washington, D.C., recently announced an agreement to buy wind power to help energize government buildings, a deal projected to save residents \$45 million over the next 20 years. Stockholm, led by Mayor Karin Wanngård, has set a goal to be free of fossil fuels by 2040. Cape Town officials, led by Mayor Patricia de Lille, have added ceilings to 8,000 older homes, lessening residents’ health problems in winter and reducing carbon emissions from heating.

Paris has committed to ban diesel cars by 2025. Cars registered before 1997, which are most likely to be heavy polluters, are already banned. Elected officials voted to turn a roadway on the right bank of the Seine into a park. Once a month the Champs Elysees is closed to traffic, giving pedestrians and cyclists a memorable way to enjoy the city.



Washington D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser



Governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike



Basel Mayor Elisabeth Ackermann

Advancements to clean the air, protect the water, and develop clean energy in C40 cities will take money—an investment of \$375 billion in low-carbon infrastructure over the next four years, C40 estimates. (Bloomberg Philanthropies, from former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, is among C40 funders.) By teaming with private sector partners and institutional funders, Hidalgo hopes to secure more financing for green cities.

She and like-minded mayors will need to act quickly. A new C40 report, *Deadline 2020*, finds the next four years will determine whether cities can change the momentum of global warming and successfully help limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Average per capita emissions in C40 cities will need to drop from more than 5 tons of carbon dioxide equivalent today to around 2.9 tons by 2030. That's a fancy way of saying emissions per person each year will need to plummet by 40 percent.


While the Trump administration is skeptical about climate concerns, self-identified Trump voters can't be easily categorized about the environment. More than 60 percent believe the government should require U.S. companies to reduce carbon emissions, according to polling from Glover Park Group and Morning Consult. Nearly three-quarters want to maintain or increase spending on renewable energy. Hundreds of businesses and investors have signed a letter asking the Trump administration to continue progress towards a low-carbon future.

Bowser, the Washington, D.C., mayor, is among those not backing down. "We're proud as a city to be part of a global movement of mayors who have said no matter what happens at the national legislature, we have tre-

mendous ability to lead our citizens, procurement power to make the investments, and we're nimble enough where we can implement good ideas quickly."

When cities lead, states and even nations may follow. Look at Australia, the largest exporter of coal in the world. More than 90 percent of electricity in the state of



New South Wales, where Sydney is located, was generated by coal and gas plants in 2015. Yet last year, the state proposed a climate strategy which matches Sydney's targets for net zero emissions by 2050. "If we can do it in Australia," Moore says, "it can be done anywhere." 

Andrea Cooper has written for *The New York Times*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *Sierra*, among other publications. She lives in North Carolina.