

STATES:

Politicization of climate change hinders adaptation in cities -- report

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Portland, Ore., gets it -- adapting to climate change, that is.

Local decisionmakers in the liberal city, with a bustling population of just over 600,000 people, reported very high levels of concern about climate change and advanced adaptation plans, according to an [analysis](#) undertaken by researchers at George Washington University (GW).

Published this month in the journal *Global Environmental Change*, the six-city case study looked at the levels and types of climate planning in Portland; Boston; Los Angeles; Tucson, Ariz.; Raleigh, N.C.; and Tampa, Fla. At the bottom of the list fell Tampa. Despite having a high climate risk -- with thousands of people below sea level and the increased possibility of being hit by a hurricane -- the city of about 350,000 has very little in the way of adaptation plans.

The researchers wanted to look deeply at social factors representing obstacles and catalysts for adaptation planning, said Sabrina McCormick, associate professor of environmental and occupational health at GW's Milken Institute School of Public Health and a co-author of the study.

Strong political will among local officials to act on climate change was the most important factor that affected a city's ability to plan, they found.

"We really need to be thinking about adaptation not just as a technical issue but as a social issue," said McCormick. "When we're telling ourselves, 'If we could just advance our technology around renewable energy or build a flood wall, that would solve our problems,' but in fact none of those things ever gets developed unless we have the political will to develop them and public pressure to push for them and institutions that can push for their development and expansion."

McCormick and her co-author, Kathleen Carlson, interviewed 65 local decisionmakers in the six cities. Things like extreme weather, vague science and political opposition could affect the ability of a city to prepare for climate change, they found. In addition, if the citizens were well-organized and advocated for action, climate adaptation plans were more likely to gain ground.

"We found, in cities where local leaders are open to feedback from constituents and open to discussions about climate change, that local organizations and advocates as well as local opinion really made a difference," McCormick said.

In Los Angeles, which ranked third in the study, officials expressed concern over natural disasters like wildfire, drought and earthquakes, which prompted them to take action. In Tampa, where more than 125,000 residents live below sea level and are in jeopardy of being affected by a hurricane, the fact that one had not occurred in nearly a century served as evidence that hurricanes were normal, despite modeling that indicates a storm surge would be deadly.

The study found that officials in Florida remain largely unconcerned about climate change, many denying the science. Nongovernmental organizations that would advocate for action felt stymied because there was little political openness on the subject.

"Interviewees in Tampa overwhelmingly claimed that, mainly due to lack of political buy-in regarding climate change, their city remains one of the most vulnerable and least prepared cities in the country," the authors wrote.

A regional perspective on climate risk

For some in Florida, forming regional groups to tackle climate planning has become a way to circumvent a lack of political buy-in.

In 2006, the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council (TBRPC), an association of regional governments, conducted a sea-level rise study with the mindset that rising water levels were a tangible hazard they could use to get state leaders on board when it came to planning for climate risk.

After it was completed, the planning effort stalled, said Maya Burke, senior environmental planner with the TBRPC. In 2011,

the region began to push for increased attention on the topic and hosted an event, "Resilient Tampa Bay," that brought local communities together to talk about the threats of rising seas. Since 1946, the region has seen seas rise 6.5 inches.

"Basically, what we learned was that we had a lot of interest with a variety of local governments, but they didn't feel like they had the support from state government or technical assistance in-house," Burke said. "They felt like they needed a regional champion."

So TBRPC created a working group with a two-year grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to create a best practices planning document. Now a year and a half into the process, Burke said the council has been able to drill down on the science and launch studies into how the region's transportation infrastructure might be vulnerable, for example. Other groups in Tampa Bay are looking at additional aspects of climate risk, including increased heat waves, changes in precipitation and extreme weather events.

Using tax dollars to make adaptation decisions has to be balanced by strong science and local support, or what Burke calls South Florida's "moderate brand of politics." After the recession, she said, many cities were forced to reduce staff dedicated to climate planning. Approaching the effort regionally gives wary local officials "safety in numbers," she said.

Burke said success would be integrating sea-level rise into all capital improvement planning and infrastructure construction in the region.

"I hope in five to 10 years," she added. "I hope that's not too long."

Where there's a will, there's a way

Portland stood out as a leader in climate adaptation in the researchers' analysis.

In 1993, Portland became the first city to put forth a plan to cut its carbon emissions. This year, the city and Multnomah County released their [2015 Climate Action Plan](#), which outlines actions to be taken over the next five years. These include things like boosting solar and other renewable energy, reducing the total energy use of all buildings built before 2010 by 25 percent, and achieving zero net emissions in all new buildings. Currently, two-thirds of all electricity used in the county is from coal and natural gas.

Increasing composting, adding bike lanes, and building staff and community engagement around the impacts of climate change are also part of the plan.

Already, the city boasts a 14 percent drop in emissions since 1990 and has set a goal of further cutting emissions 80 percent by 2050.

A constituency that cares deeply about climate issues definitely doesn't hurt the agenda, said Brett VandenHeuvel, executive director of Oregon-based environmental group Columbia Riverkeeper.

"Elected leaders take bold stances when their constituents demand that and push for that, and that's exactly what happened in Portland, and I think this fossil fuel resolution is an example of that," he said.

Last week, city officials unanimously approved a policy mandate that prevents the construction of new fossil fuel infrastructure projects, considered a big win by many environmental groups.

"The mayor, Charlie Hales, came out in support of a fossil fuel terminal and then switched his position and then went so far as to oppose all of them because of how people reacted," VandenHeuvel said. "That switch was very dramatic, and we give him great credit."

Across the country, McCormick said she was surprised by how limited the action on climate adaptation seems to be, so far.

"Considering we are the world's most economically developed country, I thought we would have foreseen at least some economic risks of climate impacts such that we would want to be prepared for them better," she said. "But mostly, we found, we're not."

Mayors head to Paris

As the world readies itself for the international climate talks in Paris later this month, cities have fought for a seat at the table. With more than 80 percent of the U.S. population living in urban centers, cities are especially vulnerable to risk. They can also be more amenable to taking climate action because cities can circumvent federal and state policy challenges.

Last month, city officials from around the world shared ideas on how to fight climate change during a 10-day initiative put together by Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Department of State called "Our Cities, Our Climate."

Speaking at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., Secretary of State John Kerry stressed the autonomy of cities to take action despite the international policy climate.

"The answer to climate change is not a mystery. It is staring us in the face," Kerry said at a luncheon for the participants. "It is called clean energy. If we change the way we power our cities, we will change the way we power the world, and in the process, we may well save it" ([ClimateWire](#), Oct. 9)

A coalition of U.S. mayors and city officials called the Local Climate Leaders Circle will also be headed to France. Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo and Michael Bloomberg, the U.N. secretary-general's special envoy for cities and climate change, will co-chair the Summit of Local Elected for Climate, to be held in Paris on Dec. 4. Portland's mayor will be among them.

McCormick cautioned that the paper was limited in scope, representing just six U.S. cities. But she stressed that local action by city leaders sends a powerful message.

"I actually think it's some of the most important action that can be taken on climate change, because we do know that local-level change does happen much faster than federal-level change," she said.

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