

Last week, San Antonio's City Council [approved](#) its first-ever [Climate Action and Adaptation Plan](#). This Plan's main benefit is its ability to track and measure GHG emissions, while also signaling to City agencies, other municipalities, and the state that it is committed to climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. This is a big win for a city like San Antonio, where Valero holds its headquarters, Halliburton has somehow carved out its own zoning district in a large part of the city, and Toyota owns a motor manufacturing plant. The arduous process took approximately two years, and leaves a multitude of lessons learned in its wake. As a member of one of the advisory committees for the Plan, I can personally attest to at least one major takeaway from the process of developing a climate change plan for a major city like San Antonio: the importance of city transparency.

## **Transparency**

The success of the Plan will depend to a significant extent on the effectiveness of its transparency measures for meeting climate mitigation and adaptation goals. To its enormous credit, the Plan incorporates climate indicators within the [SA Tomorrow Sustainability Dashboard](#), which was approved in San Antonio's sustainability plan prior to launching the climate action plan. This Dashboard provides up-to-date information on the progress that San Antonio has been making on its sustainability goals. Incorporating climate goals into the overall sustainability program is a much-needed step for measuring the City's progress, which was never recorded over time in the past and available to the public.

But the City of San Antonio does not have a good track record for instilling a sense of transparency using its advisory committees, and many questions remain regarding how the advisory committees created within the implementation section of the Plan will impact actual emissions reduction goals. Over the course of the drafting process, advisory committee meetings were largely procedural, and strong mechanisms to ensure incorporation of committee comments did not exist. Accordingly, public awareness of advisory committee comments, and the City's own obligation to take those comments into account when developing the Plan, was limited. As a result, some committee members were taken aback by meaningful changes between the first and final drafts of the Plan. To help instill confidence for future advisory committees on climate change and other city planning issues, the City should establish more rigorous transparency measures that respond to public comments and input. Simply taking public comment without signaling consideration of the comment is transparency in name only and inadequate for truly democratic processes.

This isn't the City's first struggle with transparency in decisionmaking. CPS Energy, the city's local energy provider, has been continually reluctant to provide a solid plan for their

future energy sources to the public. Despite being a publicly owned utility, its practice of limiting disclosure about its future plans stymies any opportunity for the public to substantively engage with its decision-making process. CPS has refused to close down two coal power plants prior to at least 2045 and 2060; these plants provide roughly [18% of the local energy supply](#), raising questions about how the City will achieve the Plan's goal to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

Further, the Plan's climate measures are not quantifiable, making it challenging to determine if or when the City's climate goals have truly been met. All of the Plan's most important measures for mitigating emissions refrain from providing specific targets or timelines. Mitigation measures seek to, for example, "drive towards carbon neutrality by 2050," rather than reduce its emissions factor to 0.0 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e/kWh by 2050, as proposed by the first draft of the Plan. The Plan also seeks to "continue to support" building energy efficiency programs already in place in the City, a significant change from the prior draft's goal to reduce city-wide building energy use by 15% by 2030 and 40% by 2040.

### **Incremental progress**

Transparency problems aside, advocates and city officials should ultimately be proud of passing this Plan. The road to adoption was difficult and riddled with predictable obstacles. One conservative councilmember disapproved of the concept of the Plan from the beginning (and voted against it last week). Prominent housing and fossil fuel interests advocated against the most important provisions of the Plan, if not the existence of the Plan itself. The local utility company resisted policy change and increased oversight. Environmental and social justice groups claimed the Plan was not progressive enough. Week after week, op-eds contesting or approving the legitimacy of the Plan from almost every side of the issue inundated local newspapers. The adoption of the Plan *despite* the strong challenges from competing interests demonstrates the continuing momentum towards climate action.

The Plan is already paying dividends for the City. While drafting the Plan, the [City of San Antonio won](#) the Bloomberg American Cities Climate Challenge grant of \$2.5 million in funding. This grant will fund two climate advisors that will help implement the City's climate goals, particularly within the buildings and transportation sectors. It's likely that the City would not have received this grant without initiating the development of a climate action plan. San Antonio's Plan also adds to the chorus of major cities that combat climate change in defiance of major fossil fuel interests in a Republican-majority state. I described this momentum in Texas specifically in a [prior blog](#). It's noteworthy that this initiative was started by a mayor and city council that is directly unaffiliated with any political party, and may indicate growing bipartisan support to create climate action and adaptation measures.

While the ambiguity of the Plan's measures may make success more challenging to quantify, this same lack of specificity may help the Plan remain in place without assault from more conservative future administrations. The City was incredibly close to electing a Mayor who was uninterested in pursuing a climate action plan earlier this year, so this threat certainly remains relevant. But this strategy risks slow-rolling significant emissions reductions and climate adaptation at a time when [climate change predictions are becoming ever more dire](#), and [despite the city's record-breaking heat and flooding](#).

### **Looking forward**

However, the Plan's lack of measurable goals and shoddy track record on transparency does not instill confidence that the City will push forward with implementing the Plan in a democratic or meaningful way. Crucial progress will occur when the City, its agencies, and stakeholders alike push for more transparency.

San Antonio is not unique in having to grapple with balancing industry and political needs with the existential threat of climate change. Given the local job-providers and industries, few are surprised that San Antonio passed a milquetoast climate plan. But advocates should be excited that a town mired in fossil fuel and housing interests managed to pass a comprehensive climate action plan 10-1. Now, San Antonians need to keep the momentum going.