

# Local government



# The essential role of local government

## Why are local communities important for climate action?

Minnesota's local governments play a critical role in Minnesota's climate mitigation and adaptation work. Meaningful, on-the-ground change is increasingly led at the local level — directly, through incentives, or by example. Without local government action and leadership, Minnesota will not be able to hit state emissions reduction targets.

Local governments, and locally tailored climate action, are often best positioned to engage with and respond to community needs, settings, and values. In addition, local governments hold unique powers and responsibilities that position them to make lasting climate progress. Local government climate powers include:

- **Cities, townships, counties:** Land use planning, infrastructure and transportation planning, facility investments, climate mitigation and resilience planning, management of public lands and rights-of-way, shoreland and wetland regulations, economic development and workforce planning, and emergency management
- **School districts:** Facility investments, land and transportation planning and management, public education, and resilience planning
- **Watershed districts and soil and water conservation districts:** Land management, drainage systems, and water conservation
- **Other governmental special districts:** regional development organizations, wastewater districts, metropolitan planning, and similar entities that offer intergovernmental coordination, funding, and collaboration opportunities

In addition to individual local government climate powers, each of these can provide public engagement opportunities and add value through cross-jurisdictional project support or coordination.

Local climate progress is most effective when the state supports these efforts by:

- Providing funding, technical assistance, policy support, data, and capacity
- Employing incentives and requirements to facilitate coordinated local climate action
- Collaborating with local government leaders and staff to align state and local climate targets and strategies

## Where and how can local communities lead on climate action?

Local governments hold unique powers that make their action indispensable in Minnesota's climate work. These powers allow local governments to pursue important climate actions on their own, and to play critical roles in cross-jurisdictional partnerships.

Sustainability staff can play important roles in advancing climate action, facilitating critical cross-department communication, coordination, and education. Unfortunately, not all communities have these roles. Local climate work extends beyond the work of staff supporting local sustainability, public health, climate, or resilience, touching investments and programs run by public works, planning, emergency response, parks, and schools. As a result, departments across local governments will benefit from department-specific climate guidance that allows climate considerations to be incorporated into services they already provide, breaks down silos, and integrates climate knowledge across offices.

## **Land use planning and management of public lands and rights-of-way**

Through zoning and planning powers, local governments can incentivize or require development patterns that create compact walkable communities centered around a main street or central business district. By allowing for more housing types and commercial uses in a concentrated area, and by reducing or eliminating minimum parking requirements, local governments can help reduce transportation costs, reduce air pollution, and facilitate reductions in vehicle miles traveled. Well-planned communities can also help increase housing supply, reduce housing costs, and reduce the amount of infrastructure — and associated infrastructure maintenance costs — required to serve a given community's population.

In addition, local governments can deploy land-use controls and land ownership to preserve natural and working lands and to require or encourage natural systems in built-environment areas. For example, zoning use designations can:

- Preserve agricultural lands and Minnesota's farming heritage
- Promote tree planting and preservation
- Require stormwater retention and green infrastructure which can play important water management roles

For public green spaces and parks, local governments can ensure that lands they manage directly are adapted to be resilient to climate change impacts, providing community health and infrastructure protection benefits.

Local governments' right-of-way control also allows for multi-sector climate impacts. Through right-of-way control — whether of town roads, city streets, or county highways — local governments can:

- Strengthen multimodal transportation networks
- Implement Complete Streets designs
- Create low- or zero-emissions zones to support transportation mode choice, reduce single occupancy vehicle travel, improve public health outcomes, and lower transportation costs for community members

In addition, local governments can support climate-friendly transportation choices by managing and pricing parking, managing stoplight operations, providing electric vehicle charging, establishing vehicle weight limits on certain streets to reduce wear and tear, encouraging more efficient vehicles, and increasing pedestrian safety.

Right-of-way control also gives local governments authority or influence over utility infrastructure and stormwater systems. For example, local governments can collaborate with or support district energy or thermal energy networks, which can efficiently provide heating and cooling solutions.

## **Non-regulatory levers and leading by example**

Financial incentives for projects, such as rebate programs for energy upgrades or tax incentives for sustainable development, can spur resident and business climate action, and can provide additional benefits for recipients. For example, weatherization and energy conservation incentives make housing stock more resilient to extreme weather, improve indoor air quality, and save money. The same projects on public facilities can reduce operating costs for a city hall, a fire department, or for affordable housing.

Local governments can also spur climate-friendly investments with non-monetary programs. These include targeted density or building height bonuses, expedited permitting programs for sustainable projects, and recognition programs that visibly celebrate private sector "green businesses" or "climate champions."

Public engagement and educational programs are another important form of non-monetary local climate action. For example, local governments build local knowledge through free or low-cost workshops and trainings on energy efficiency, sustainable landscaping, climate-friendly food options, waste management, or transportation options. And public campaigns — such a biking campaign or promotion of composting and recycling — can promote behavior change.

Finally, local governments can show the benefits of climate action by example. Local governments can:

- Invest in public building energy improvements and electric car or bicycle fleets
- Embrace sustainable purchasing practices
- Implement recycling and organics recovery or sustainable landscaping programs
- Showcase pervious surfaces

These actions influence private sector decision-making, particularly when these public decisions or investments are paired with awareness campaigns or are part of demonstration or pilot projects that showcase innovative technologies.

## How can the state support local climate action?

While local governments can lead in areas like land use regulation and right-of-way control, many more opportunities exist through state support of local action, whether financial, legislative, or through partnerships and education. State support is particularly important when the federal government deprioritizes climate investments. Direct feedback from local government participants in the Climate Action Framework process recommended three distinct areas of action, summarized below.

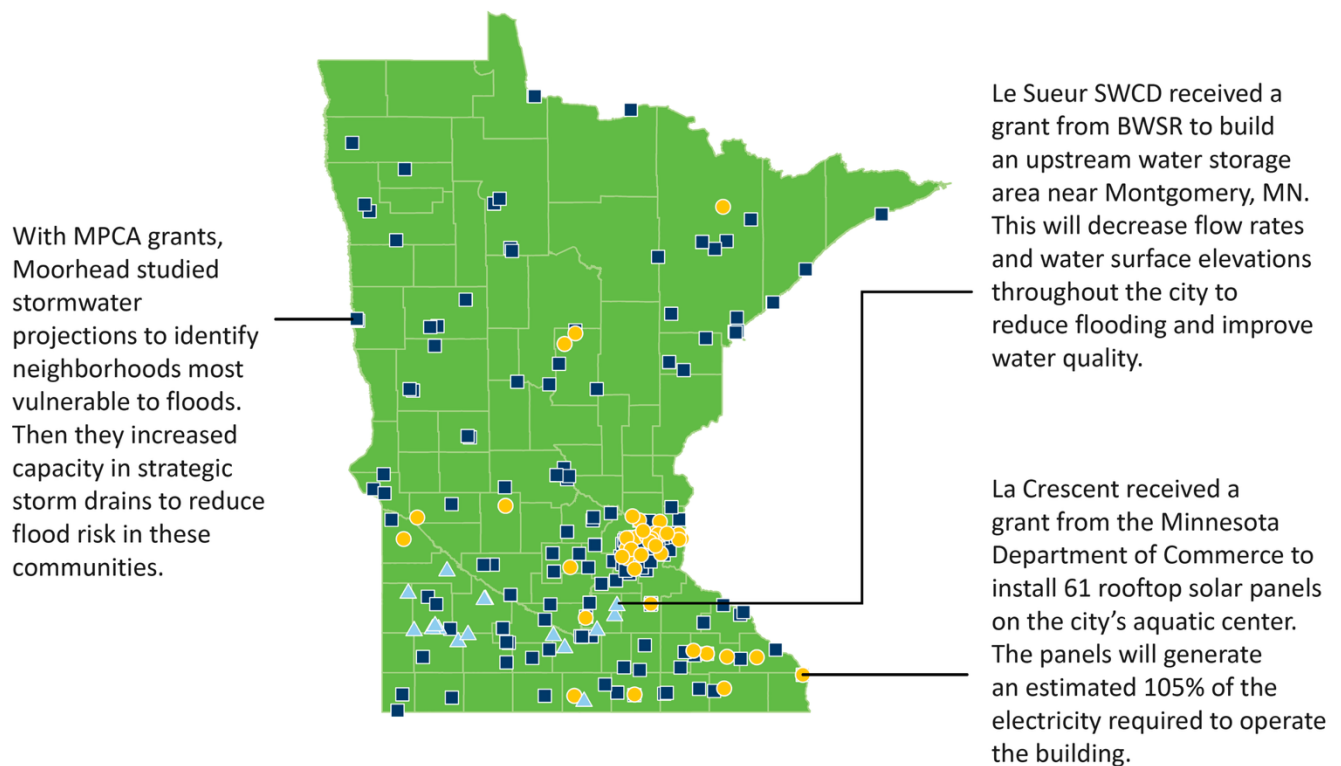
### **Funding, technical assistance, policy supports, data, and capacity**

When the state provides funding for local government climate action, the state can ensure that that resources reach those most in need. It is particularly important for the state to prioritize climate funding for those most likely to experience climate-induced hardships, whether because they are a historically disadvantaged community, are in a geography susceptible to climate-specific vulnerabilities, or are an energy transition community.

Funding support is most valuable to local governments when it aligns with existing local climate priorities, as it was in recent Minnesota Pollution Control Agency stormwater, wastewater, and community resilience grants. State climate grants have helped communities across the state prepare for and act on climate change. During the 2023 Legislative Session, Minnesota invested over \$100 million in climate resiliency, water infrastructure, and local climate action grants. Since 2022, the state has awarded nearly 250 climate resiliency and local climate action grants, totaling over \$95 million. Taken together, these grants are helping communities across the state prepare for and act on climate change. Learn more about these grants and see a map of projects at the [Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's Climate Grants](#) site.

The figure below shows climate investments made by the MPCA (blue squares), Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) (blue triangles), and the Minnesota Department of Commerce (yellow circles) to reduce climate pollution and prepare communities for climate change. In addition, the Minnesota Climate Innovation Finance Authority (MnCIFA) has provided loans for clean energy projects. Updates to those projects are published on MnCIFA's website.

## Local climate investments across Minnesota



However, if funding is intermittent or unpredictable, local communities may not be able to engage in sustained climate work. Further, when funding requires a local match, it can create insurmountable hurdles for local communities.

Beyond direct state funding support, the state can help fund local climate work by granting local governments climate-focused and/or equitable revenue-raising authority through local income taxes, carbon taxes, or congestion pricing. The state can also facilitate and accelerate local climate action by providing policy supports and removing state preemption for key climate activities.

Finally, the state can provide climate education and capacity supports, particularly for smaller local government units that may not have specialized staffing. This may take the form of trainings, workshops, or sharing local climate success stories. The state can also develop and provide resources and tools for cities and counties — like local greenhouse gas emissions data, climate projection data, model ordinances, or policy examples — to reduce barriers to local climate program planning and implementation. This supportive approach can be leveraged through the Minnesota GreenStep Cities and Gold Leaf Challenge programs, public/private partnerships that support communities working toward sustainability, and local climate action through assistance and recognition.

## **Incentives to facilitate coordinated local climate action**

All Minnesotans benefit when communities participate in climate work, and it is important that state dollars support Climate Action Framework goals. To help guide state investments, the state can establish parameters to ensure work will help, not harm, Minnesota's climate goals before providing infrastructure, program, or project funding.

Similarly, the state can explore ways to incentivize local government funding for climate planning and action, beyond competitive grant processes. For example, the state could release certain funds upon the creation of a local climate action plan, or could create policies, funding, and reporting parameters to ensure that local transportation investments align with the Minnesota Department of Transportation's efforts to reduce greenhouse gases and vehicle miles traveled.

## **Collaboration with local government leaders and staff to align state and local climate targets and strategies**

State and local entities can partner on strategies to demonstrate and communicate the benefits of climate leadership. When state and local efforts are combined, those efforts become mutually reinforcing and increase impact.

Coordinated communications can help community members understand how climate action provides tangible benefits day to day, whether through improved health, long-term public cost savings, reduced household expenses, or other outcomes. Centralizing information across the state for resources such as funding opportunities, best practices, and tools or examples can aid local leaders in the actions necessary to meet statewide and local climate targets.

Coordinated and complementary infrastructure and program investments can also maximize community impacts. In transportation planning and operations, for example, local street designs, state highway planning, Safe Routes to School initiatives, and regional transit planning — including bus rapid transit investments — can dovetail to increase safety and health outcomes, reduce household transportation costs, reduce vehicle miles traveled, and bolster multi-modal transportation options, particularly for vulnerable or under-resourced populations.

Additional opportunities for alignment exist in the pursuit of a reliable, safe, and clean energy grid; promotion of climate-friendly procurement practices; expansion of Minnesota's electric vehicle charging network; development of policies and practices to protect against climate and ecological risks; and establishment of green workforce and economic development initiatives.

## **Moving forward**

Communities across the state of Minnesota are stepping up and offering innovative, place-based solutions that are essential to our statewide progress. These local actions are even more critical during times the federal government shifts its focus away from climate. Strong support for local efforts is an important component of how Minnesota will achieve the Climate Action Framework goals.