

Green communities key in climate change fight

Cities and communities are major players when it comes to climate change and the environment.

- About 80 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions are created within cities.
- Climate change is felt most directly at the local level. This impact will only grow, as extreme weather events test physical infrastructure as well as social and community services.
- Municipalities have a central role in mitigating the impacts of climate change and pollution, and in adapting to the inevitable changes that will take place.

Local governments are well-positioned to fight climate change, protect the environment and safeguard the health of their communities:

- Municipal policies and facilities for transportation and transit, waste management, water systems, utilities, building standards and urban design all have major and long-lasting impacts on climate change and the environment.
- Municipal governments can exercise substantial legal powers to make their communities greener in many ways.
- Local governments are responsible for 58 per cent of all public infrastructure in Canada. This infrastructure needs updating and retrofitting to deal with climate change.

Municipal governments are leaders on climate change in many areas. The FCM's Center for Sustainable Community Development, Green Municipal Funds and Partners for Climate Protection, together with the actions of many individual towns and cities, have led to substantial progress – far beyond what upper levels of government in Canada have achieved so far.

National support needed

There is much more that can and must be done at the local level. But municipalities and local communities cannot continue to shoulder this responsibility without stronger leadership - as well as resource and financial support - from federal and provincial governments.

The federal government must put in place a comprehensive national plan on climate change, together with a national public transit plan, developed in collaboration with provinces, municipalities, First Nations, environmental groups and labour organizations.

Trade and privatization barriers to progress

Federal and provincial governments must also stop pursuing trade agreements that restrict the ability of municipal governments to protect the environment and combat climate change.

The Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA) and other trade agreements with similar investor-centered dispute-resolution procedures limit the ability of local governments to protect the environment and public health. TILMA gives corporations sweeping powers to sue governments for virtually any program or regulation that is interpreted as restricting or impairing investments or profits.

TILMA is already putting a chill democratically-elected governments and boards seeking to introduce proactive measures that protect the environment and community health, including restrictions on junk food in schools and municipal restrictions on plastic and packaging.

Federal and provincial measures to push privatization and public-private partnerships (P3s) on local governments will also have harmful impacts on the environment. Privatization, whether a P3 or contracting out, takes direct control of public services out of the hands of local governments, limiting their ability to make positive changes. Trade deals that grant corporations the power to sue governments compound the negative impacts of privatization.

Public solutions to climate change

Public energy utilities, including those operated by municipal governments, provide a tremendous opportunity to expand the use of renewable power. Unfortunately, most public utilities in Canada are often restricted from developing new renewable energy projects on their own.

Municipalities that have kept garbage collection in-house often achieve a considerably higher rate of waste diversion than those that have contracted out the service. Publicly-operated recycling services have slightly lower overall costs than contracted-out operations – and significantly lower costs in some provinces.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees and its members have a long history of promoting and preserving healthy and sustainable communities. This work is rooted in a strong concern among our members about the future of their communities and the planet.

CUPE and other unions have long advocated for concrete federal and provincial steps to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and meet our Kyoto commitments. CUPE and other unions also work hand-in-hand with environmental organizations, including the BC-based Labour Environmental Alliance Society to promote healthy workplaces, homes and communities with a focus on reducing environmental toxins.

CUPE national and its provincial divisions are working together to:

- Develop national, regional and local climate change policies and action plans.
- Create tools and educational materials on climate change, including workplace environmental audit tools, materials to develop workplace environment committees, and materials to negotiate environmental provisions in collective agreements.

A number of CUPE locals have already taken the lead in getting their employers to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which has led to considerable energy savings.

Climate change and environmental challenges are real and complex. They require many changes to the way we work and live. Municipal governments can increase their capacity to meet these challenges by working with CUPE locals to promote public environmental solutions. CUPE is very engaged as a union on this issue. Our members are concerned and ready to take action. By working together with CUPE and its members, municipal governments can make a real, positive difference.

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