Capstone Focus Group

Nov. 13, 2024, 3:00 - 5:00 pm

Barre, Vermont

Overview

Vermont's Climate Action Office, along with members of the state's Climate Council, met with Capstone Community Action clients and staff to discuss the update to the Vermont's Climate Action Plan. The meeting was held in person at Capstone's headquarters in Barre on November 13, 2024. This was an opportunity to share information about topics being addressed in the update, and to hear about priorities, ideas, concerns, and questions from the perspectives of the low- and mid-low-income Vermonters who use Capstone's services. These summary notes capture ideas that emerged in the conversation. Nine clients and four staff members participated in the conversation.

Notes

Opening prompt: "When you hear the words climate change, what comes to mind?"

Participants' answers:

- Polar bears
- Impermanence
- Point of no return
- Food
- Fear, stress, how will things change?
- Uncertainty and fear
- Opportunity. The silver lining is we have a chance to make a lot of changes on this planet, exciting
- Choice. Climate change is the consequence of the choices we have made and shapes the choices we have to respond to it.
- I think about how long it would take to deplete wildlife in my area if everyone depended on it (as a food source)
- Acceptance and ingenuity
- Safety
- My thought is towards my children, and all of our children. If we don't do something now to curb the tide, when is too much?

Climate Action Plan Update

Sophi Veltrop from the Climate Action Office presented an overview of the Climate Council's process to update Vermont's Climate Action Plan. Participants looked at notecards with the topics that the Council's subcommittees are working on. They provided individual reflections and then discussed in large and small groups.

Group discussion:

- Worried about grid resiliency, and susceptibility to outages. Recommend utilizing multiple backup sources for heat/cooking/hot water – "it's costly, I know it has a bad environmental impact but can't risk it currently."
- Emphasized personal consumption choices. And cost/benefit of things like smart phones. What's the cost of these technologies, "is it really worth it?"
- Concerned about lack of public transportation infrastructure
- We have solutions, but struggle to build them to scale… there are solutions already demonstrated elsewhere - for instance gas is 11 bucks a gallon in Europe - that encourages investments in clean technologies
- How do we pay for the solutions we know to exist?
- It isn't enough to give people tax breaks and little bits of funding here and there. Eliminate all barriers and just get people what they need. Not a credit towards an EV, just buy them an EV etc. Also, there are too many programs and they are too complicated to understand and manage.
- Referenced a study that shows cars are only used for 3% of their life, they sit idle 97% of the time, increasing car sharing would help a lot. Increase use of public transportation and bicycles like they do in Amsterdam.
- Huge transportation is the biggest polluter, and we need to address it at scale
- Why aren't the waterfalls generating electricity any more?
- An investment in affordable housing at scale needs to be part of the solution.
- Ensuring everyone has access to adequate healthcare is critical.
- Addressing the root causes of homelessness, additional support for people returning to the community after incarceration etc.
- A deeper systems level change is needed, not just band aids.
- Return to Roosevelt era taxation approach - tax the rich.
- Enhance available jobs by building infrastructure improvements needed for a clean energy transition.
- Adopt land use policies to promote development that can handle the extreme weather we've been seeing.

- Learn from other climates. Where has innovation and learning taken place that can help us here?
- Return to neighbor helping neighbor community-based support ethos. This meets basic needs while improving people's mental health.
- Public health: water safety is key. Better wastewater plants. Public health insurance for all.
- Don't underestimate the stress and mental health implications of climate change.
- Community is so important; doing something fun together will have a huge impact.
- Intergenerational approach.
- We've gone so far from this (community). Human beings are more independent and isolated than ever before.
- 350.org (350 million parts per million carbon, pollution counter on top of a mountain in Hawaii as far away as possible from pollution sources is already measuring 420 parts per million).
- In other parts of the world climate change is already driving migration and bringing people into conflict over scarce natural resources and land. Only .5% of water on earth is available fresh water.

Written input:

- The ideas for reducing emissions all require a lot of money to implement. They will need funding from sources that don't hurt financially burdened people.
- The ideas for agriculture, forestry, and resilience seem like they will be fostered by planning and executing existing things.
- Agriculture and Forestry: focus on non-polluting farming and forestry practices that preserve and enhance the natural environment. Organic is key to healthy ecosystems. Switch cow dairy to goat dairy.
- Climate Resilient Land Use & Conservation: sustain Vermont's special urban centers, surrounded by farms, practice sustainable forestry (no clear cuts), increase/support forest biodiversity
- Electricity: carbon taxes would provide funding for sustainable energy sources. Examples: gas taxes in British Columbia and European countries.
- Grant funding to support incentives for weatherization, electric heat sources, car share
- Public Health: remain a forested, limited development state. Clean water and better air quality standards. These all reduce disease and improve mental health.
- Communicate public health advisories at local levels
- Restore floodplains
- Housing: Update zoning for greater density in towns/cities; must scale up building
- Better coordination of regional emergency plans

- Switch to solar, pellets and biofuels
- Make Montpelier Vermont's Venice, get rid of cars, buy a gondola!
- Electricity: diversity of sources; build for scale; reduce use; not affordable to have an electric vehicle.
- Transportation: public transit a big need, rural/urban divide. Fuel efficient vehicles too costly. Walking/biking better but not realistic.
- Buildings: weatherize. Window upgrades, use energy efficient building materials and techniques.
- Unity: will climate change initiatives work to unite us?
- Public health: insurance for all. Inform, educate, use best known science.
- Infrastructure: add transportation/public transit. Better waste water treatment. Ban on chemicals that damage infrastructure.
- Community: stop isolating from each other. Community meetings on housing. Create community-building activities everywhere.
- Viable power > Vermont Yankee > clean electricity
- Clean power to grow food
- Cost of living and inflation; lower cost of electric power; is solar power cheaper?
- Give all people the same healthcare; give poor people a chance to thrive
- Stop driving gas powered cars, trucks; use rideshares and more buses; how can we reduce traffic and fuel consumption
- Stop using lithium and cobalt for our batteries
- Barter system