

EQUAL VOICE NEWS

California Could Help Build a Federal Green New Deal

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By Sarah Gustavus



Climate change and inequality are receiving a growing amount of attention in the U.S. As Congress considers the federal Green New Deal, will lawmakers look at important regional steps taken by grassroots organizations, families and cities?

Congress is debating the merits of the proposed federal [Green New Deal](#), which aims to curb climate change and inequality. Lawmakers might look to California for examples of how working with grassroots activists and local communities can produce real results.

In fact, efforts in California could provide a road map for statewide – and national – efforts

“At the municipal level is where people can see and experience solutions themselves and improve their quality of life,” says Carolina Martínez, policy director at the [Environmental Health Coalition](#).

Martínez says the effort to improve air quality in the San Diego area is led by families experiencing the effects of greenhouse gas emissions, which could include things like [higher asthma rates](#).

Elevating the voices of families has emerged as a unifying theme in programs across California.

“We don’t have a choice but to be in the spaces and create the new solutions,” says Martínez. “We call them innovative, but they are the solutions that are needed.”

One of the organization’s top issues is increasing access to public transit. Martínez says the majority of local jobs aren’t reachable by bus, so members are advocating for deployment of electric buses, followed by a phasing-in of additional infrastructure improvements.

The Environmental Health Coalition previously advocated for increased accountability in local transportation agencies. Now, members are preparing to push for a ballot measure in 2020 to fund local transportation improvements.

Transportation accounted for 29 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States in 2017, according to the [Center for Climate and Energy Solutions](#), an independent research organization.

LA’s Green New Deal

In Los Angeles, the nation's second largest city, Mayor Eric Garcetti recently announced a citywide plan titled [LA's Green New Deal](#), which also includes investment in public transit. The plan addresses a range of environmental concerns, and community stakeholders gave input on issues from housing to local food access.

LA's Green New Deal complies with the Paris Agreement on climate change, which the Trump administration announced plans to exit in 2017.

"We're one of only a few cities with a Paris compatible plan, and I think other cities will enjoy taking a look at the rigorous analysis that was done," says Dominique Hargreaves, deputy chief sustainability officer for the city of Los Angeles.

Hargreaves says working with community members ensured that environmental justice was centered in the city's plan.

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Carolina Martínez of the Environmental Health Coalition

One goal in LA's Green New Deal is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions below 50 percent of 1990 levels by 2035. The steps to accomplish that include increasing access to public transit and reducing emissions in existing buildings. The plan also calls for Los Angeles to switch to a fleet of zero-emission vehicles in less than 10 years, if technically feasible.

It's important to look at previous collaborative successes to understand the current plan, says Scott Cummings, a professor at the UCLA School of Law.

Expanding the LA Airport and cleaning up the ports gave the city a road map for bringing together stakeholders, according to Cummings.

"The labor and environmental movement tried to get rid of the dirty trucks that come to and from the ports, he says.

This ensured that vehicles were running on clean fuel and that drivers were getting paid a living wage, Cummings adds.

Cummings says there's a misconception that labor and environmental interests are different – that "labor wants job development and job development means incursions on the environment.

"Tensions can be overcome, and there's a big space of interest convergence when solutions advance both interests," he says

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"Community participation is essential in democratizing our renewable energy future," says Gladys Limón, executive director of the [California Environmental Justice Alliance](#).

"The Green New Deal is not about having piecemeal legislation but a comprehensive framework to transition our society to healthy, renewable energy," says Limón. "That can seem like a formidable challenge, but one that is full of potential for economic prosperity and improvement of the well-being of all communities."

She says California has made progress meeting ambitious renewable-energy goals, but less has been done to address the immediate environmental impacts of oil and gas production on nearby communities.

Limón points to new statewide initiatives like the [Transformative Climate Communities \(TCC\) Program](#) in California as an example of what is possible when local community members get involved. The climate program is funded by California's Cap-and-Trade Program. Community leaders can submit plans for infrastructure and local development projects, and grants have already been awarded to Fresno, Ontario and the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles, among others.

Californians will be watching closely as LA's Green New Deal is implemented. A [dashboard](#) is available for people to track what's been done so far.

"There's a mind-spinning array of challenges," says Cummings. "Not all of it will get enacted, but laying out the vision and pushing forward is what we desperately need right now."

Other cities across the United States are implementing local climate plans. [Santa Fe, New Mexico](#), recently announced a strategy for achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040. [Dallas](#) is asking residents what they would like to see included in a climate plan, which is expected to be finalized next year.

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