

## Overcoming Climate Policies

### Salt Lake City's Vicki Bennett Explains How Climate Became an Acceptable Conversation in a Politically Conservative Environment

*Vicki shares her wisdom freely with humor and humility. Learn how she has worked to move the climate change conversation into the open at the local, regional, and state-wide level.*



**Q.** You recently completed a USDN Innovation Fund grant (products [here](#)) to expand the [Utah Climate Action Network](#) (UCAN). You built a network coordinator job description, a replicable public climate change engagement strategy, a fundraising plan, a carbon footprint report, and a climate effort catalog by a Utah organization. Now, you have a Partners for Places application in to initiate inclusive engagement of low-income and minority Salt Lake City residents in efforts to mitigate climate change impacts, improve community resiliency, and ensure social equity. Is there a connection between these two efforts?

**A.** The Utah Climate Action Network has become a policy and programmatic clearinghouse that promotes collaborative applications of best practices aligned with major climate impact areas: Water, Energy, Transportation, Public Health, Economy, and Land. The Partners for Places proposal is separate. We will be talking to UCAN about what we are doing with the Partners for Places grant if it is awarded, but it is a separate effort.

The city wants to do low income energy efficiency. The equity issues are something we are really trying to understand. We are in the process of engaging in the current equity training offered by USDN. I've been through 2 training modules myself, and while it is too soon to say definitively, I think it is going to be incredibly useful. I did the equity training offered 2 years ago at the NAF meeting in St. Louis. It was good, but not grounded in project work. Training really makes a difference when there is a project attached to test applications in.

**Q.** Salt Lake City has been leading in climate change preparedness for some time now. Think Progress ran an [article](#) on how climate change is impacting your water infrastructure in 2015, showing leadership at the city level, if not the state. The city has just released a [Climate Positive 2040](#) plan, even as citizens march on the governor's mansion to ask for climate action. How has this momentum occurred in a politically conservative environment?

A lot of it is that we as the city just dive off on our own. We make it for our citizens and we aren't afraid anymore to use the climate word. Two years ago we decided to call it what it is. I've noticed even in the conservative world, climate is becoming an accepted conversation. We don't place blame or fault, but we present it instead as an evidence-based issue that we have to address collaboratively.

Some of our state legislatures are handling the purse strings, but even at this level, the conversation has been more open lately. We've slowly brought people along and within the city, we are charging ahead. We're currently working with our utilities on purchase of all renewable energy for city operations by 2020. Learning to play within the utility system one has is important. If we said we were doing our own power purchase agreements (PPAs) without them, it would be counterproductive. So, we sat down with them and asked what we could do within their current system. Now, they own the solar and profit from it, yet we still benefit. So, we find ways to work within an imperfect system.

To really change the paradigm of discussions throughout the state, we started the Utah Climate Action Network. At first, there was excitement but no cash or direction. But a lot of the forward motion came from our health department. The county is not as progressive as the city: it's probably a 50/50 political split. So, we put it in terms of water quality, disease control, and air quality. This framing makes people start to realize that climate change is a "now" issue, not a problem for future generations.

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**Q. Your Climate Action Plan is ambitious, yet short and easy to digest. The final section addresses climate change. It outlines a two-tiered approach to tracking climate change: mitigation of carbon and embedding resiliency. The Utah Climate Action Network factors into your implementation plan. How valuable to you is this collaborative element?**

A. Addressing climate change at the local level means reducing carbon pollution while enhancing resiliency to negative social, environmental, and economic impacts in a warming world. Salt Lake City is working on both fronts, collaborating with stakeholders both regionally and statewide to document and mitigate local risks.

I guess the short answer is that while you can't quantify these relationships, they are vital. Approximately 90% of the things we chose to start working on are because of a USDN-based collaboration. If we look at what we are prioritizing, it is because we have a USDN group we are working on these issues with, or because we have seen examples of it happening within USDN. The U.S. Department of Energy (U.S. DOE) has been our other significant connection point through all our solar work so far. The work that is city-centric, we can do alone. But anything that is beyond city jurisdictions, like the energy system structures and air quality, we really rely on good relationships to see through.

Salt Lake City is the largest urban area in a valley of 17 smaller cities. We must try to share what we are doing with them, and why. We have slowly shared solar and greenway best practices. We show that we can work with large buildings to make them more energy efficient. This is why the climate preparedness work is so vital. The cities in our valley will take what we do and create their own programs – they will watch, and then ensure that what they do fits their own specific needs. Our mayor understands the need to collaborate with other cities, and she has offered our department's services to them as they aren't large enough to support their own sustainability team.

**Q. What are your key takeaways from the CNCA Annual meeting?**

A. I felt at home, knowing the process, the funders, and a few of the folks I met during the initial Copenhagen meeting a couple years ago (which founded CNCA). Connecting on the thermal decarbonization efforts was impactful. I just accepted the New York City invitation to stay an extra day on the back end of the USDN Annual Meeting to discuss heat pump issues. This is an important issue for me to move forward on. I'm also connecting with San Francisco on the plastics ban issues. My mayor is really excited about the doors CNCA could open for us.

**Q. You are a USDN co-chair and a founding member. What advice do you have for newer USDN members?**

A. Find a small core group of sector-spanning supporters to collaborate with. Start to gather and examine data. What are the risks? What do you see that may be happening, and how can you positively impact these things? As this group comes together, they can work on the messaging to fit the specific region. That is the first step. When we did our first symposium with the word "climate" in it, we hosted it at the university. We branded it to not just be the city. If you can get someone else to help lead, it's not just you, a crazy liberal in the middle of a desert valley.

**Q. When you think back on all the years and your good work, what is your career defining moment?**

A. I'm happy to see representatives from the Mormon Church and some other conservative partners coming to our UCAN meetings and listening. They aren't formally signed on, but they are showing up. This is the most conservative body we deal with, and we are glad that they are participating. We are working hard to move the climate discussion away from being a political issue here, as it is from the Washington, D.C. lens. As it is becoming evident that climate change is impacting us now, the message of caring for creation is important more than ever.

**Q. What advice do you have for the new Sustainability Director?**

Be patient. Pace yourself. When I look at most of my work, I can see how far it has come. But, each start was slow. Understand that it takes time to achieve these big goals. People in social media have taught me this: climate change is a societal issue, a culture change. A conversation must occur, and for a while, before it takes root and results in the sea-change we all work for.