CNCA Innovation Fund:
Focusing on the Transformation to Carbon Neutrality

20 cities on 5 continents have formed the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance (CNCA) and are working together to redesign their energy, transportation, waste, and water systems. The goal is to eliminate carbon emissions.

What is their approach to innovation?

At a Glance: CNCA Innovation Fund (IF) grant opportunity.

The purpose of the CNCA IF is for CNCA core members to support leading international cities to work together to create deep emissions reductions. While a CNCA core member must lead, any city can participate. Proposals are typically accepted annually, during 1 intensive RFP round. The fund can offer up to $1,000,000 USD. Projects usually take one year to complete, but often can take up to 18 months. CNCA IF area of strength in the Innovation Pathway: Innovation Lab.

A Clear Goal

The CNCA IF focuses on decarbonization in cities through refinement of existing climate mitigation methods and by continuing to test and spread new mitigation innovations that advance cities towards their carbon neutrality goals. This fund is designed to primarily focus on carbon reduction and climate change mitigation efforts. It narrows the lens of urban sustainability back to its origin: combating climate change by dramatically reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Even cities with proactive, supportive, and ambitious administrations struggle to advance their carbon neutrality goals. Due to various factors - such as limitations in program design, funding, technology, and research - there is still a significant gap between cities stated GHG reduction goals and the pace of their actual reductions. Cities are significant carbon emitters, with one third of all global GHG emissions are attributed to dense urban areas. Because of this, they also have the power to greatly reduce emissions to curb climate change, even as they also learn to adapt to it. Current scientific projections indicate that to avoid the worse climate change scenarios, GHG emissions must be cut 80% by 2050 at a minimum. Time is of the essence.

A Clear Gap. Other USDN funds have supported cities as they work to as they achieve their midterm GHG reduction goals (typically 20 - 30%), as well as a host of other, non-GHG related sustainability goals. The CNCA IF is focused on how cities will be able to achieving 80% GHG reduction by 2050. It cannot be just the Sustainability Directors acting with only in tandem with their peers across the globe – there must also be buy-in from all levels of government and new and productive cross-departmental and cross-sector partnerships. There must be significant resources available to fund significant systemic change: both in what is motivating operational and capital decisions and in how infrastructure is designed and implemented at the local level.

The First Year. CNCA launched its Innovation Fund in 2015 to invest in projects that develop, test, implement, and scale urban deep decarbonization initiatives. The grant fund is made possible with support from the Kresge Foundation, Barr Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation, Bullitt Foundation and Summit Foundation. In its first 18 months, the CNCA IF invested $1,700,000 in 17 early-stage innovation projects targeting transportation, energy-supply, buildings, waste, and water systems.

Though the CNCA IF, CNCA members are creating, building on, and applying a fresh body of work focused on urban decarbonization strategies. These innovations explore how to reduce carbon emissions within the complex political and operational structures of major international cities. CNCA members develop their innovations to achieve and scale carbon neutrality.

Thinking Bigger. CNCA just completed its first strategic planning process and is preparing to partner with the private sector, research universities, and urban design professionals to expand its network and resources. New goals include: 1) to achieve transformation by investing at a level that advances transformation in cities; 2) to focus investments in the development, testing, refining, and implementation of high-priority innovations in each carbon emitting urban system; 3) to scale promising approaches by identifying the most replicable emerging strategies in each emitting system, and tailor for application in other cities; and 4) to engage global corporate businesses in developing projects and markets, such as building retrofitting and renewable energy supply.