

Planning Processes: A Tool that Builds Local Political Support

Dwight Eisenhower once said, “Plans are nothing. Planning is everything.”

Throughout the 2016 Member Impact Survey, creating and adopting plans was ranked as a relatively easy way to set a community up for future GHG and quality of life impacts, while having strong potential to build political support. Read more about the survey [here](#).

Compared to other sustainability actions in the 2016 Member Impact Survey, planning is perceived as relatively attainable. More cities have started work on many planning actions and also rate them as having fewer barriers to implementation, particularly in mid-size communities (with populations of 250-750,000) with actions like sustainability plans. Figure 1 shows that most survey respondents are already developing or implementation community sustainability and climate planning actions.

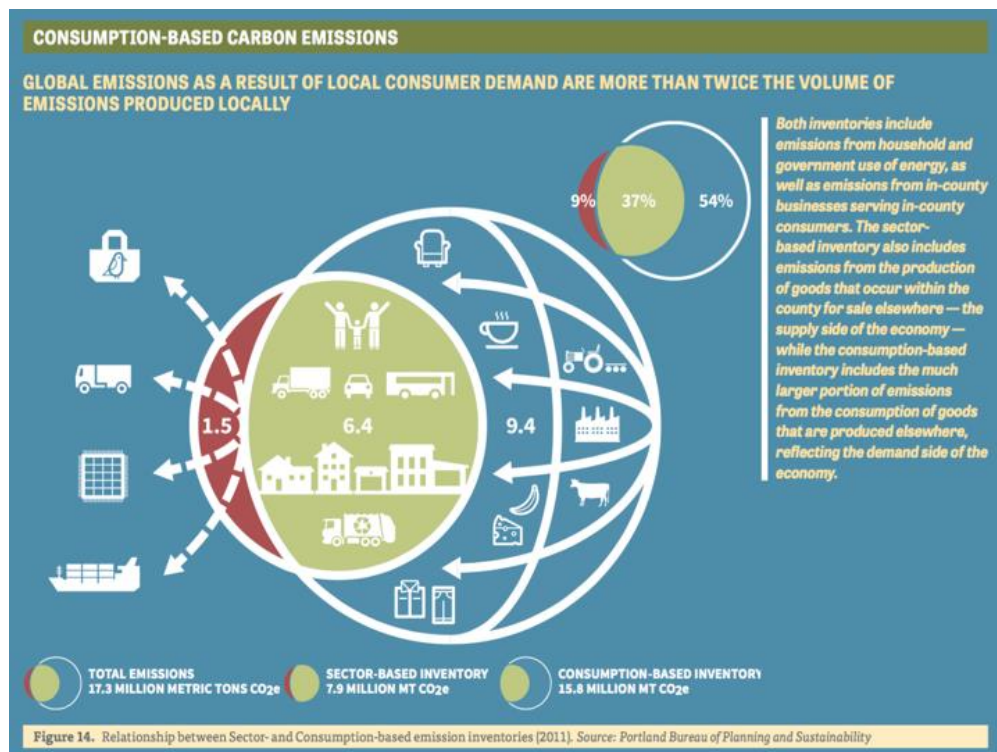
Figure 1. Planning Action Implementation in USDN Member Communities, 2016



Climate preparedness plans and vulnerability assessments appear to be the rising frontier for USDN cities. While they currently having the lowest levels of implementation, members increasingly work to standardize this practice. The quickly growing USDN portfolio of knowledge on this topic is [here](#). Recent examples of this work include a project led by Seattle on preparing for extreme heat in low-income communities and another led by Fayetteville AR to create a Southeast Adaptation Planning and Resiliency Handbook.

Some planning efforts are newly emerging, such as developing a consumption policy – which is ranked as “feasible but not yet working on it” in 39 communities. In 2016, the USDN Innovation Fund released the [Sustainable Consumption Toolkit](#), designed to help communities think about the broader context of consumption: the shift in values away from consumerism; technological innovation and efficiency gains; recognition that consumption needs to rise for some; and transformation of the economy to function within real limits. Figure 2 depicts an image from the City of Portland OR’s 2015 Climate Action Plan update, which shows carbon caused from consumption activities.

Figure 2. Portland OR graphic depicting consumption-based carbon emissions, 2015



A key to the success of any planning effort is obtaining community input, support, and ownership of the goals and associated work it takes to achieve them. This cannot be done without community trust of local government, which is built from working successfully within districts and neighborhoods. The survey shows that neighborhood or district-scale engagement practices are still developing and continue challenging – but with potentially high impact. 51 USDN member communities are involved in planning or implementing related programs now. USDN, in partnership with The Funders Network, released a District Scale Sustainability Scan in 2014 ([here](#)). It provides a framework for viewing district-scale work and notes that communities can define success in 3 ways: (1) by supporting the goals of a climate-action or sustainability plan; (2) by engaging the private sector in supporting climate / sustainability goals; and (3) by linking these goals to ongoing neighborhood and community development planning.

In summary, so much of the success of a community’s sustainability work depends on generating the right amount of political and community support, which can then translate into funded ability to really address the more difficult sustainability actions that bring us closer to more elusive game changers, like zero net energy or a culture of reduced consumption. There is a common frustration that plans are prevalent but that their implementation is weak at best – but the 2016 USDN Member Impact survey does point to the need to engage in the process. Not only does it allow for goals to be set, but it also brings stakeholders to the table in ways that individual initiatives cannot.