

# Climate Communication for Local Governments



Ames, Iowa flooding in 2010. Photo credit: FEMA

**Five guidelines to help city and county  
staff and elected officials message climate  
solutions, science, and local impacts**

**November 2011**

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## Introduction

Let's face it: As a topic, climate change is unpopular, polarizing, complex—and an unavoidable part of the national conversation.

The local one, too. Without constructive climate communication, local governments' plans and initiatives would never get off the ground. And since we've got so much ground to cover, now is the time to take stock of the most effective communications approaches. What can we learn from the latest psychological and communications research, and the on-the-ground experience of municipal staff? A heck of a lot.



## Good Communication Builds Relationships

“For local governments, climate communication should be thought of as a way to build relationships, not to win a debate or convince people to think the same way,” says Brian Holland, ICLEI USA’s Climate Programs Director. “You build relationships when you understand your audience and speak to their values and priorities.”

When you build better relationships, you make more progress. To help you improve your communication on climate action, ICLEI has compiled guidelines and tips from leading academic publications—as well as ICLEI’s own staff and our local government members—applicable to the situations like these:

- Engaging community members or municipal staff in the development of your energy or climate action plan
- “Selling” climate action to your elected officials
- Presenting your greenhouse gas inventory results at a city council meeting
- Writing text for your climate action plan or website
- Creating messaging for your mayor

We offer no magic bullets. Only five guidelines for how to engage more people in dialogue and solutions around climate action.

## Distilling Climate Communication into Five Guidelines

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### About This Guide

ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability USA developed this resource to assist its local government members. The document is organized into five guidelines. Each section lists the takeaway points as well as additional resources. At the end of the guide, you'll find a cheat sheet with a summary of all five guidelines and their takeaway points.

**Author:** Don Knapp, Communications and Marketing Manager, ICLEI USA  
Special thanks to Justus Stewart and Patrick Robbins for additional writing and research.

### About ICLEI USA

ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability USA is the leading nonprofit membership association of local governments committed to sustainability, climate protection, and clean energy. The local governments we serve—including 550 active U.S. members—recognize the importance of creating livable, prosperous communities, addressing climate change, and saving energy and money in the process. ICLEI USA provides the expertise, technical support, training, and tools to help its members advance their goals. To learn more, visit [www.icleiusa.org](http://www.icleiusa.org).

## Guideline #1: Know your audience so that you can target your messages to them.



Photo credit: FEMA

Effective communication is targeted communication. That means you know your audience and you're speaking their language. Your messages resonate because they are relevant.

Understanding your audience is critical for effective climate communication, says Eli Yewdall, Program Officer with ICLEI's Member Support and Training Team. "When you're working to build support or get feedback for a climate action plan," he says, "you'll need to engage a diversity of stakeholders in your community: neighborhood group leaders, business leaders, religious leaders."

### Identify the Right Stakeholders to Engage

Each group may have its own motivations for supporting local climate action (energy savings, disaster preparedness, job creation, stewardship of the land) or their own priorities about what should be in a climate action plan. Your first job is to identify the

right stakeholders to engage—for both the plan’s credibility and its effective implementation—and then determine how to engage them in the process.

In Kansas City, MO, for example, a steering committee for the city’s climate action plan included, among others, the executive director of the local AFL-CIO, the CEO of the investor-owned utility, the President of the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, and a well-respected, 17-year member of City Council. After some initial reservations, the Chamber of Commerce added its support for the plan after being engaged by the investor-owned utility’s leadership, who convinced them of the economic benefits of implementing energy efficiency and low-carbon initiatives.

## Find Credible Messengers

That underscores another key to success: Find credible messengers to deliver your targeted messages—who speak the language of your audience and share their values.

“Without support from our Chamber, adoption and implementation of our climate action plan would have been very difficult,” says Dennis Murphey, Kansas City’s Chief Environmental Officer. “To be successful you have to engage the broadest possible group of stakeholders. And to do that, you can’t make [climate change] a politically one-sided issue.”

Likewise in Olympia, WA, city officials engaged diverse community groups to gather their needs and priorities on climate action, among other environmental concerns. They targeted their audiences with small group discussions (the business community wanted their own meetings), among a range of outreach strategies.

“We asked our community what they needed from the city,” says Jennifer Kenny, Associate Planner with the City, “and they requested that we lead more visibly on sustainability and climate action.”

## Be Clear on Your Communications Goal

Olympia’s example brings up another key point: Make sure you know what you’re asking of people before you engage them. What is your communications goal? To gather their feedback? Increase awareness of an issue? Mobilize their action or participation in a program? Be clear about it.



Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter. Photo credit: Bbsrock

## Takeaways

- Know your audience so you can speak their language.
- Engage the broadest possible group of stakeholders in your community.
- Identify the motivations of different groups for supporting local climate action.
- Find credible messengers to deliver your targeted messages.
- Be clear about what you're asking of people before you engage them.

## More Resources

- [ICLEI's Outreach and Communications Guide](#):  
More guidance on identifying and reaching your target audience.
- [National Conversation on Climate Action website](#):  
Free resources on planning and promoting climate action events.
- [The Psychology of Climate Change Communication](#):  
This guide contains a wealth of information, including how to know your audience and get their attention.

## Guideline #2: Be aware of how Americans' values shape their beliefs on climate change.



Photo credit: FEMA

When you understand your audience, you can talk about climate change in ways they can understand and relate to, in ways that respect their values and priorities. It's called "framing." An example of *not* framing climate change information would be dumping a lot of detailed climate science and statistics on your audience with no easy way for them to understand what it means and how it relates to their own lives.

### What the Six Americas Report Tells Us

So what are the most effective frames for climate change and climate action? To answer that question, it's first helpful to understand how Americans view climate change. A landmark report from the May 2011, "Global Warming's Six Americas," sheds some light.

The report, published by the Yale Project on Climate Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, collects extensive survey

data to divide the U.S. population into six groups with varying attitudes about climate change:

- Alarmed (12 percent)
- Concerned (27 percent)
- Cautious (25 percent)
- Disengaged (10 percent)
- Doubtful (15 percent)
- Dismissive (10 percent)

The Alarmed group is the most concerned about climate change and the most motivated to address it. These are the people who show up at your climate action planning meetings. The Dismissive are the least concerned; however, this group also feels that it is adequately informed about the issue. Researchers now have a good grasp of the underlying psychology of each, particularly the Doubtful and Dismissive groups, and it turns out that this underlying psychology is a better predictor of climate change beliefs than political party affiliation or religion.

## The Mindset of People Who Dismiss Climate Change

Let's take a quick look at the mindset of the Dismissive, or climate denier audience, as a way to underscore the effectiveness of framing communication around values. What makes this group hold their beliefs in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence? Typical climate change messaging conflicts with their core values.

Remember that *all of us*, not just the Dismissive, tend to gravitate toward beliefs and political positions that reinforce our deeply held values, even when the facts do not. We take positions that confirm what our group (workplace, family, church) believes so they'll accept us as a member in good standing.

In a recorded webinar on risk communication for the EPA State and Local Climate and Energy Program, David Ropeik explains. Ropeik, an author and consultant on risk perception and risk communication, and instructor at Harvard Extension, says that people who dismiss climate change are often "individualists" who want society and government to stay out of their affairs (no government regulation, thank you) and/or "hierarchists." "They believe society should have a predictable structure and rank, and maintain the status quo," he says.

To admit the existence of climate change, and the solutions to fix it—which require large changes to the status quo, and require everyone to work together—would be in direct conflict with their core values, says Ropeik. So dumping more climate science facts on this audience may backfire; people may dig in deeper to beliefs that support their position.



## How Climate Doubters Can Still Support Climate Action

But here's where it gets interesting. While climate doubters may not believe mainstream climate science and may abhor the idea of a federal carbon tax, the Six Americas report cites surveys suggesting they may support many local climate and energy policies:

- Three-quarters of Americans said they would like their communities to build more bike paths and bike lanes, and to increase the availability of public transportation, including 60 percent of the “Dismissive” group.
- Majorities of the Alarmed, Concerned, Cautious and Disengaged supported requiring new homes to be more energy efficient; changing zoning rules to reduce the need for a car and commuting times; and promoting the construction of energy efficient apartment buildings.

This is encouraging news: Broad support for local climate and energy action is possible!

The May 2011 report, *Public Support for Climate and Energy Policies*, reaffirms this:

- Large majorities (including Republicans, Democrats, and Independents) say it is important for their own community to take steps to protect the following from global warming: public health (81%), the water supply (80%), agriculture (79%), wildlife (77%), and forests (76%)
- Majorities of Americans want more action to address global warming from corporations (65%), citizens themselves (63%), the U.S. Congress (57%), President Obama (54%), as well as their own state and local officials.
- 82 percent of Americans (including 76% of Republicans, 74% of Independents, and 94% of Democrats) say that protecting the environment either improves economic growth and provides new jobs (56%), or has no effect (26%). Only 18 percent say environmental protection reduces economic growth and costs jobs.
- 91 percent of Americans say developing sources of clean energy should be a very high (32%), high (35%), or medium (24%) priority for the president and Congress, including 85 percent of Republicans, 89 percent of Independents, and 97 percent of Democrats.

There is arguably something for nearly everyone to love about local climate and energy action, and maybe your leading messages don't have to emphasize the word “climate.” In *Guideline #4*, we'll talk more about the most effective “frames” through which to talk about climate change solutions.

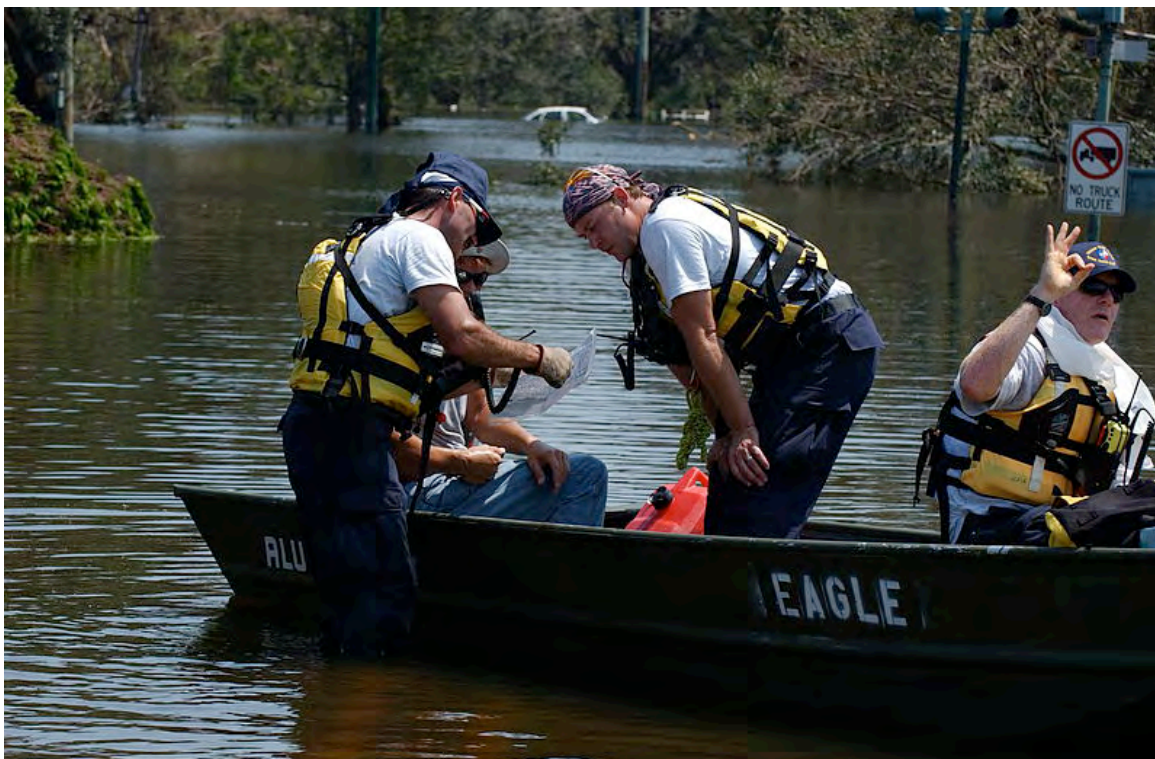
## Takeaways

- Six categories of Americans have varying beliefs about climate change, based on their underlying psychology and core values.
- Understand which climate change messages may conflict or align with your audience's core values.
- Frame climate change in ways that your audience can relate to, in ways that respect their beliefs.
- Recognize that broad support exists for climate action initiatives (bike paths, clean energy, etc.), even among those that question climate change.

## More Resources

- [Global Warming's Six Americas in May 2011:](#)  
Read more details about the beliefs Americans hold on climate change.
- [EPA State and Local Climate and Energy Webcast on Risk Communication](#), Nov. 18, 2010 (scroll toward bottom of page):  
Listen to the presentation or view the slides about how people perceive risk and how their values shape their beliefs on climate risk.
- [American Climate Attitudes:](#)  
May 2011 report analyzes public opinion trends and provides communication and engagement recommendations.
- [Understanding an Audience's Social Values: Communicating with Americans with different worldviews on global warming:](#)  
2010 guide breaks down audiences according to their values (Caretakers, Traditionalists), and offers framing and messaging tips.

### Guideline #3: To capture your audience's attention, talk about climate impacts in local, immediate terms.



New Orleans, LA, during Katrina. Photo credit: FEMA

In the minds of most Americans, even the climate “Concerned,” climate change is simply not an issue that requires urgent attention. Certainly not compared to our jobs crisis, or even a sudden environmental catastrophe like the Gulf oil spill.

If you want your community members, municipal colleagues, and elected officials to care about climate change, you’ve got to make the issue local, tangible, and in the here and now. A graphic of Al Gore’s hockey stick cannot match the emotional impact of an image of a flooded street in your community, or a child in the emergency room because of an asthma attack caused by poor air quality during a heat wave.

A key to any local government presentation or discussion on climate change is compelling evidence of existing local climate impacts—an increase in the frequency and severity of flooding, drought, or heat waves—and credible scientific predictions for future impacts.

The City of Chicago raised the bar for detailed research on local climate impacts. “Without a scientific foundation, we wouldn’t have been able to prioritize,” said Joyce Coffee, Chicago’s Director of Project Development, Policy and Research, in *Promising Practices in Adaptation and Resilience*, a resource guide published by the Institute for Sustainable Communities. “The way (Chicago’s climate action plan) conveyed the science helped grab the attention of the public and thought leaders, by making climate change impacts real to people.”

Below are more reasons to talk about climate change in local terms:

## Local Makes Climate Change Personal

People need to understand how climate change will impact them personally. This is an essential tenet of risk communication. “Is risk personalized or abstract? If it’s abstract then people will play down the risk,” said David Ropeik in his EPA webcast on risk communication. People aren’t motivated by a global, abstract, intellectual issue, but they are motivated by issues that resonate emotionally: the impact climate change could have on your children next week.

Ropeik cites a 2006 Yale study that asked the question, Who will be affected by climate change? Most thought it would happen to future generations; others said developing nations. Fewer still thought it would affect their own communities, and even fewer believed it would impact their families and themselves. A risk that we perceive as happening later, or to others, is obviously less motivating.

When collecting feedback from Boston community members on initiatives for the City’s climate action plan, City officials tried to get people to think about the issue in personal terms. “We asked them, ‘What are you most concerned about? And then, what motivates you as an individual to take action to prevent climate change? What motivates your neighbor?’” says Carl Spector, Executive Director of the City’s Air Pollution Control Commission.

## Local Makes Climate Change Real

“Climate change isn’t real until you see it happening locally,” says Anna Fahey, Communications Strategist at the Sightline Institute and an expert on climate communication. In a community presentation or on your website, show these impacts visually: photos of the elderly being affected by a heat wave, beaches eroded due to sea level rise, or your infrastructure after a 50-year flood. You have to bring climate change home as a local issue: It’s not about polar bears, it’s about you and your neighbors. It’s a human health problem, not just an environmental problem.

In Boston, during community meetings to gather feedback on the City’s proposed climate action initiatives, Carl Spector began the meetings with a short presentation on climate science and local impacts like predicted sea level rise, heat waves, and flooding. Listing local impacts reminds participants, *This is why we’re here, talking about climate change.*

## Local Makes Climate Action More Urgent

Because the local frame makes climate change more personal and real, it also becomes a more urgent issue, especially in communities recovering from extreme weather. If your goal is to mobilize action, then talking in local terms will be most effective.

## Local Makes the Case for Smart Planning

When you can show how the climate has changed locally and how it has affected your community, then the issue of whether climate change is human-caused becomes less relevant. Climate action is about smart hazard mitigation planning and risk management to prepare for impacts and disasters, to “avoid the unmanageable and manage the unavoidable.”

Local governments are acting as protectors of public safety, looking out for the interests of their community members, property, and natural resources. It is much more difficult for a climate skeptic in your community to argue against practical local planning than global climate science. The “precautionary principle” holds that action should be taken to reduce the risk of harm to the public from potential threats such as climate change, despite the absence of 100 percent scientific certainty about all aspects of the threat.

## Takeaways

- Climate change is simply not an urgent issue in the minds of most Americans.
- Most people believe climate change will affect future generations or distant lands, not their own community or family in the short term.
- A risk that we perceive as happening later, or to others, is obviously less motivating.
- If you want people to care, make the issue local, tangible, and in the here and now.
- People need to understand how climate change will impact them personally.
- Present compelling evidence of existing local climate impacts and credible local predictions.
- Show local climate impacts visually: photos of the elderly being affected by a heat wave, beaches eroded due to sea level rise, or your infrastructure after a 50-year flood.
- Frame climate action as about smart planning to protect your citizens' safety and health, as well as protect local assets and natural resources.

## More Resources

- [Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States:](#)  
Seminal 2009 federal report outlines detailed climate change impacts by region.
- [The Psychology of Climate Change Communication:](#)  
Includes guidance on how to translate scientific guidance into concrete experience.
- [EPA State and Local Climate and Energy Webcast on Risk Communication](#), Nov. 18, 2010  
(scroll toward bottom of page):  
Listen to the presentation or view the slides about how people perceive risk and how their values shape their beliefs on climate risk.
- [NOAA Climate Services website](#) and [NOAA National Climatic Data Center website:](#)  
Find updated information on climate science and impacts

## Guideline #4: Emphasize the power and practicality of local climate solutions, especially community preparedness.



News flash: People prefer to hear about solutions, not problems. That’s why you should spend more time talking about here-and-now climate solutions than recounting scary and overwhelming impacts predicted for 2050. Everybody loves practical solutions to local problems; not everybody loves climate science, so don’t lead with it.

Solutions are empowering. Climate change is a huge problem; if people feel like it’s insurmountable, then they won’t take action. Be sure to talk about the specific, simple ways that individuals and groups in your community can make a difference and reap the benefits.

### **It’s the Climate Action, Stupid**

“Make solutions seem like a no-brainer,” says Fahey. “As if to say, ‘Why *wouldn’t* you do this?’” Saving energy and money, using clean local energy, creating jobs, improving air quality—all no-brainers, and you should frame them that way.

“Highlight the low-cost, low-risk actions your local government can take,” says Monica Gilchrist, ICLEI’s Interim California Director. “Things that you would do whether you subscribe to climate science or not.”

## Find the Most Effective Frame

Remember, effective framing is key to help you build awareness and support for your local government’s programs and policies. When your messaging connects with your audience’s values and concerns, you’ll be most successful.

“In some areas if you say “climate change,” city council members might become dismissive, but if you talk about public health, economic growth, or another issue that is important to them, they will listen,” says Gilchrist. “The key is to lead with an issue or aspect of climate action that allows the conversation to take place.”

## Climate Adaptation Can Build Support for Climate Mitigation

New research among a range of climate communication experts suggests that people are more motivated to support efforts to prepare their communities for climate impacts than to mitigate climate change through voluntary emissions reductions measures.

The take-home: Consider talking about the need to prepare and adapt your community to impacts before you talk about reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Researchers even suggest that climate adaptation could be a stepping-stone to greater support for climate mitigation. A 2011 study in *Nature Climate Change* on perceptions of climate change offers the following conclusion:

“We show that those who report experience of flooding express more concern over climate change, see it as less uncertain and feel more confident that their actions will have an effect on climate change. Importantly, these perceptual differences also translate into a greater willingness to save energy to mitigate climate change. Highlighting links between local weather events and climate change is therefore likely to be a useful strategy for increasing concern and action.”

A brief from The Resource Innovation Group (TRIG), *Can Climate Change Preparedness Efforts Spur Greater Interest in Emission Reductions*, seconds this conclusion.

“We have completed research in Oregon that indicates that involvement in climate preparedness and adaptation activities spurs greater interest in reducing emissions,” says Bob Doppelt, Executive Director of TRIG. “Our findings suggests that climate protection advocates might have missed a major opportunity to increase awareness and actions to reduce emissions by downplaying preparedness and adaptation. A much greater focus on it now is not only needed given the temp rise already in the pipeline—it might also help turn the tide politically.”



## Six More Options for Framing Climate Action

Only you can decide what is the best way to message climate action in your community. Here are some other effective frames that you can incorporate into your messaging:

### Community Resilience

While we've already discussed the power of engaging people around community preparedness, the similar term "resilience" may be an even better option: Who wouldn't want to live in a more resilient community that is better equipped to deal with natural disasters and economic uncertainties?

The Community and Regional Resilience Institute defines resilience as "The capability to anticipate risk, limit impact, and bounce back rapidly through survival, adaptability, evolution, and growth in the face of turbulent change."

On the website ResilientCity.org, moderator Craig Applegath writes that "Resilience is a good word to capture the idea of how to future proof our cities and their built fabric in the face of future shocks and stresses from climate change and peak oil."

Resilience is a powerful and common-sense frame for talking about climate mitigation and adaptation, as well as energy initiatives. It bypasses the whole anthropogenic climate science debate and stresses the urgency of creating stronger communities that can withstand or bounce back from economic crises, energy uncertainty, and natural disasters. Resilience is about good planning to keep communities strong.

The Greenworks Philadelphia plan, for example, lists as a primary goal, "Philadelphia reduces its vulnerability to rising energy prices." That's a resilience frame, even though the goal's measures (reduce energy consumption, add renewable energy sources) are also classic climate mitigation.

### Public Health/Quality of Life

Climate change is very much a public health issue, since it will bring more heat waves and exacerbate air pollution. Climate solutions, therefore, protect the health of community members, particularly vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly. In the report, "Conveying the Human Implications of Climate Change," from George Mason University, experts such as Edward Maibach, Ph.D., MPH, urge public health officials to "frame the issue as a human health problem—rather than as an 'environmental problem.'" A public health frame resonates with all of the Six Americas groups. The report goes on to say the following:

"Research has demonstrated that Americans who view climate change as being harmful to people are significantly more likely to support climate policy responses. Other research has found that when global warming is introduced as a health problem and information is provided about how specific mitigation-related policy actions will lead to health benefits such as cleaner air to breathe, healthier food to eat, and more pedestrian- and bicycle-

friendly communities, a broad cross-section of Americans respond positively to this re-framing of the issue.”

### **Economic Prosperity**

“Stress the economic benefits of local climate action, especially to those who are concerned about the economic costs of environmental policy,” says Holland. If you’re saving taxpayer dollars through municipal energy efficiency initiatives, or creating local jobs through clean energy projects, you should trumpet those initiatives.

“Highlight the enormous opportunities of moving away from dirty fuels of the past,” says Fahey. Connect the dots between climate action, clean energy, and economic prosperity, rather than talking about climate action by itself. Whenever possible, make your messages speak directly to individuals about how they will benefit.

“The benefits the public most prioritizes are energy independence, good health, American jobs, and accountability for businesses and corporations,” writes David Roberts of Grist. “Any supporter of climate action with access to a microphone ... should be hitting those four themes over and over.”

### **Sustainability/Triple Bottom Line**

Climate action is often framed as one of many community sustainability initiatives: Meeting the needs of the present without sacrificing the future, and linking environment, equity, and economy. It’s a concept that has the potential to transcend political boundaries.

Sustainability and climate can also be framed through the similar business term, “triple bottom line”: people, planet, profits. Climate action is about doing the right thing for the people of your community (protecting them from climate impacts), the planet (doing your part to fight global warming), and local business (creating economic opportunities through climate initiatives).

### **Stewardship**

Wise stewardship of the Earth and its resources can be a good starting point for a conversation about climate solutions, especially among religious groups for whom that is a strong value. Promote solutions that protect your community’s natural resources for “current and future generations.”

### **Innovation**

“Action to prevent climate change should be characterized as being about new thinking, new technologies, planning ahead, forward-thinking, balanced alternatives, efficiency, prudence, and caring,” writes Fahey on the Sightline Institute’s Climate Checklist blog post.

For example, in a message to Philadelphia's citizens about the City's Greenworks Philadelphia sustainability plan, Mayor Michael Nutter employs an innovation frame:

“Together we can build on our momentum, realize the benefits of sustainability for all of our citizens, and establish Philadelphia as a city on the cutting edge of innovation in the 21st Century.” That's a message that both business leaders and environmental activists can get behind.

## Takeaways

- Spend more time talking about climate solutions than scary climate problems, which can overwhelm people.
- Make climate solutions seem like a no-brainer (saving money, creating jobs, etc.).
- Highlight low-cost, low-risk actions and the benefits they bring to individuals and municipal governments.
- Connect climate solutions to your audience's values and concerns.
- Consider talking about the need to prepare and adapt your community to impacts before you talk about reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
- Choose the most effective “frames” to talk about climate solutions in your community:
  - Preparedness/resilience
  - Public health/quality of life
  - Economic prosperity
  - Sustainability/triple bottom line
  - Stewardship
  - Innovation

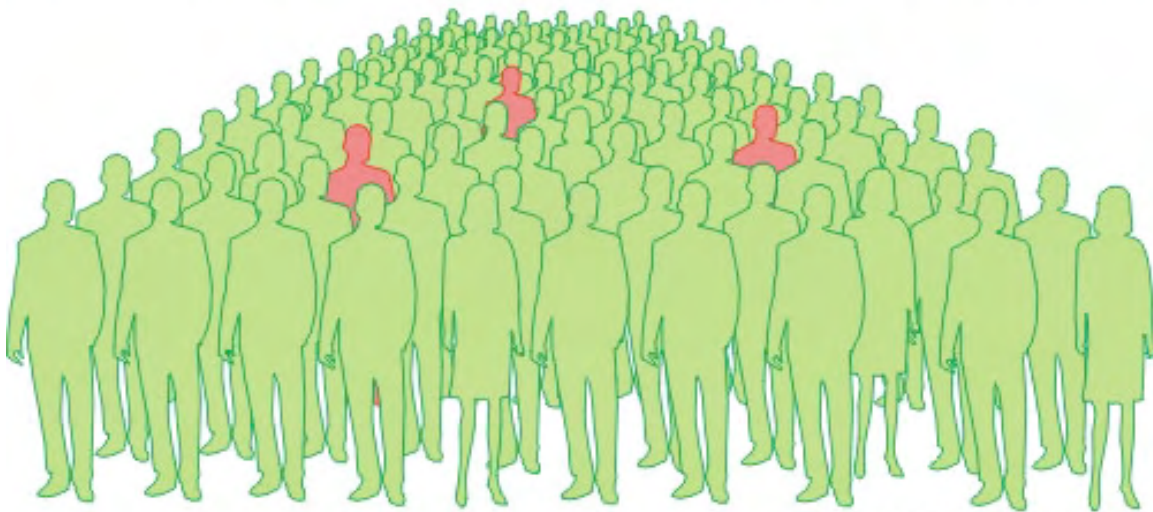
## More Resources

- [Climate Communications and Behavior Change:](#)  
2010 report discusses how to build support for climate policies, and how to understand and connect with audiences. Provides detailed talking points and messaging tips
  
- [Sightline Institute Flashcards:](#)  
Quick-reference tools for effective communications strategies on topics ranging from climate change to pollution and economic development. See also Anna Fahey's blog posts on climate communication.
  
- [Conveying the Human Implications of Climate:](#)  
Report discusses why and how to frame climate change as a public health issue.
  
- [ClimateAccess.org:](#)  
Website presents a wealth of information on messaging climate change, including effective frames.
  
- [Can Climate Change Preparedness Efforts Spur Greater Interest in Emissions Reductions?:](#)  
2011 Brief by The Resource Innovation Group presents groundbreaking information on this effective approach.

## Guideline #5:

Address climate science in a simple, compelling way, and stress the certainties of what we know.

# 97 out of 100 climate experts think humans are changing global temperature



Doran et al 2009, Anderegg et al 2010

Credit: skepticalscience.com

Broaching the science of climate change is tricky. You want to give people an understanding of why climate change is occurring and how serious the problem is. You want to give them the facts without telling them how they should feel. If you're not careful, however, you can overwhelm your audience, turn them off, or exacerbate the doubts fueled by disinformation.

As we've said already, talking about climate change, including evidence and impacts, is best done in local terms to make it real for people. But when you have to provide broader climate science background or answer scientific questions, follow the tips below to keep your communication focused and effective.

## Avoid the Gloom and Doom

Researchers have learned that when climate communicators overwhelm people with dire and seemingly hopeless predictions of climate-caused disasters across the global, it doesn't mobilize them to take action. It shuts them down. People become paralyzed when they feel the situation is out of their control. If there is no solution, they block out the

problem. Again, that's why talking about climate change in local terms is often more successful; spend more time talking about solutions than problems.

## Begin With the Bottom Line

A common mistake in climate communications is overwhelming people with scientific or statistical detail. Remember that people are motivated to take action when climate change transitions from an intellectual to an emotional issue (this will affect my family, my community). So go easy on the granular detail, and don't begin with background information or supporting details that eventually lead up to your conclusion. (This is a common communications mistake made by scientists.)

Start with the main point, in plain language: Give a simple, straightforward summary of what climate change is and why we should care. Here's how Susan Hassol, a climate change communicator and lead author of the Climate Change Impacts on the United States report, tells the short story of climate change: "The world is warming. Humans are the primary cause of that warming. The impacts will, overall, be bad for us. But there's something we can do about it. The future lies largely in our hands."

Another example from the Union of Concerned Scientists website: "The Earth is warming and human activity is the primary cause. **Climate disruptions put** our food and water supply **at risk, endanger our health, jeopardize** our national security, **and threaten other** basic human needs. **Some** impacts—such as record high temperatures, melting glaciers, and severe flooding and droughts—are already becoming increasingly common across the country and around the world."

A final tip: Avoid scientific jargon and unclear terms like "consensus" and "bias" in favor of phrases that make science understandable. Greenhouse gases are "heat-trapping gases"; or, they form a "heat-trapping blanket."

## Stress the Certainty of What Scientists Know to Clear Away Doubt

Misinformation campaigns about climate science work when they sow the seeds of doubt. Sightlight's Anna Fahey writes about how our brains latch on to doubt for an issue as complex as climate change; it's a normal reaction. When doubt creeps in about whether predicted climate impacts will really occur, we lose the motivation to act, especially when there are so many other issues to worry about.

The response, says Fahey, is to emphasize what we do know and have overwhelming evidence for. "We should pound the drum that 97% of climate scientists agree that climate change is real, it's happening now, and it's human-caused," she says.

NASA's excellent Global Climate Change website is organized to make clear the rock-solid evidence for climate change. On the site's Evidence page lists short blurbs with clear and compelling facts on sea level rise (it rose 6.7 inches in the past century, but the

rate is nearly double over the past decade), global temperature rise, an increase in extreme weather events in the United States, glacial retreat, and more. Not too much information, and not hard to understand.

If you have access to published climate scientists in your community or region, consider inviting them to a community forum or council meeting to speak. The major of Americans still view scientists as a “trusted source” on climate change.

## **Show Climate Change Visually With Images and Graphics**

If you’re giving a presentation on climate science or climate action, remember to use visuals whenever possible, for maximum impact. Images of current, local climate impacts make the issue real and tangible for people; graphics like a pie chart of greenhouse gas sources in your community make statistics easier to understand, and more impactful. Try to pair each point of evidence for climate change with a corresponding image. Need graphics? See below for free resources on [SkepticalScience.com](http://SkepticalScience.com).

## **Remember That in Healthy Discussion There Is Room for Disagreement**

When you engage your community on climate change, be ready for strong opinions—that climate change is a hoax, or that climate action doesn’t go far enough. Whatever comes your way, remember to stay respectful and calm. “Don’t be defensive, be willing to listen,” says City of Boston’s Carl Spector. At one of the city’s community climate workshops, several individuals staged a brief demonstration about the need for climate action to be connected to the economic health of the community. “I said to them, ‘At the next discussion period I’m coming down to your table and we can talk more,’” says Spector. “It was great. The purpose was to allow people to speak, and I was there to listen to what they had to say.”

## Takeaways

- Avoid the gloom-and-doom messages on global catastrophes that can overwhelm your audience and shut them down.
- Begin talking about climate science by stating the bottom line: the simple, straightforward summary of what climate change is and why we should care.
- Stress the certainty of what scientists know to clear away doubt.
- Show climate change visually with images and graphics.
- Remember that in healthy discussion there is room for disagreement.

## More Resources

- Free climate change graphics on SkepticalScience.com:  
A range of climate change graphics are available on this website under a Creative Commons license, (which means you can use them, but you have to credit the owner.)
- Union of Concerned Scientists' Global Warming web page:  
Easy-to-understand overviews of climate impacts, climate science, and climate solutions.
- NASA's Global Climate Change website:  
Easy-to-read indicators, evidence, and causes of climate change
- NOAA's State of the Climate in 2010 Report:  
Key findings on global climate change, and updates for North America.
- The Scientific Guide to Global Warming Skepticism:  
Common myths and responses from SkepticalScience.com



# Summary Sheet:

## Climate Communication for Local Governments

Takeways from “Climate Communications for Local Governments,” developed by ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability USA ([www.icleiusa.org](http://www.icleiusa.org))

Remember: Climate communication is not about winning debates, but building relationships.



**Guideline #1: Know your audience so that you can target your messages to them.**

- Engage the broadest possible group of stakeholders in your community.
- Identify the motivations of different groups for supporting local climate action.
- Find credible messengers to deliver your targeted messages.
- Be clear about what you’re asking of people before you engage them.

**Guideline #2: Be aware of how Americans’ values shape their beliefs on climate change.**

- Six categories of Americans have varying beliefs about climate change, based on their underlying psychology and core values.
- Understand which climate change messages may conflict or align with your audience’s core values.
- Frame climate change in ways that your audience can relate to, in ways that respect their beliefs.
- Recognize that broad support exists for climate action initiatives (bike paths, clean energy, etc.), even among those that are dismissive of climate change.

**Guideline #3: To capture your audience’s attention, talk about climate impacts in local, immediate terms.**

- Climate change is simply not an urgent issue in the minds of most Americans.
- Most people believe climate change will affect future generations or distant lands, not their own community or family in the short term.
- A risk that we perceive as happening later, or to others, is obviously less motivating.
- If you want people to care, make the issue local, tangible, and in the here and now.

- People need to understand how climate change will impact them personally.
- Present compelling evidence of existing local climate impacts and credible local predictions.
- Show local climate impacts visually: photos of the elderly being affected by a heat wave, beaches eroded due to sea level rise, or your infrastructure after a 50-year flood.
- Frame climate action as about smart planning to protect your citizens' safety and health, as well as protect local assets and natural resources.

#### Guideline #4: Emphasize the power and practicality of local climate solutions, especially community preparedness.

- Spend more time talking about climate solutions than scary climate problems, which can overwhelm people.
- Make climate solutions seem like a no-brainer (saving money, creating jobs, etc.).
- Highlight low-cost, low-risk actions and the benefits they bring to individuals and municipal governments.
- Connect climate solutions to your audience's values and concerns.
- Consider talking about the need to prepare and adapt your community to impacts before you talk about reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
- Choose the most effective "frames" to talk about climate solutions in your community:
  - Preparedness/resilience
  - Public health/quality of life
  - Economic prosperity
  - Sustainability/triple bottom line
  - Stewardship
  - Innovation

#### Guideline #5: Address climate science in a simple, compelling way, and stress the certainties of what we know.

- Avoid the gloom-and-doom messages on global catastrophes that can overwhelm your audience and shut them down.
- Begin talking about climate science by stating the bottom line: the simple, straightforward summary of what climate change is and why we should care.
- Stress the certainty of what scientists know to clear away doubt.
- Show climate change visually with images and graphics.
- Remember that in healthy discussion there is room for disagreement.