



**More than Climate Change**  
*Best Communications Practices*

**Oregon Sustainable Transportation Initiative (OSTI)**

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# More Than Climate Change Communications Best Practices

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
The Challenges of Communicating about Climate Change.....	2
Barriers to Action.....	2
The “Say-Do” Gap.....	2
Communication Best Practices .....	5
Use Multi-Channel Communications .....	9
Communicate Using Local Values and Local Benefits .....	10
Leverage Existing Public Involvement Processes .....	11
A robust public process on the ground—timelines and tactics.....	12
Conclusion .....	13



## INTRODUCTION

The Oregon Sustainable Transportation Initiative (OSTI), is an integrated statewide effort begun in 2010 to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the transportation sector. Guided by a stakeholder engagement program, the initiative built collaborative partnerships among local governments, the state's six Metropolitan Planning Organizations, the Oregon Department of Transportation and the Department of Land Conservation and Development. These efforts will help Oregon meet its long range goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 75 percent by 2050 and increase our region's energy security, independence and prosperity through smart, integrated transportation and land use planning.

OSTI encompasses five focus areas:

- Development of a Statewide Transportation Strategy;
- Adoption of greenhouse gas emission reduction targets for metropolitan areas by the Land Conservation and Development Commission;
- Development of land use and transportation scenario planning guidelines for greenhouse gas emissions reduction;
- Outreach to the public on climate change; and
- Development of the Greenhouse Gas Transportation Emissions Reduction Toolkit, tools that support local governments in reaching their emissions reduction goals.

This communications guide is one component of the Toolkit. This guide is designed to help MPOs and local governments engage in a public dialogue about climate change. It is meant to address **how**, **when** and **why** to communicate about the benefits of climate action during land use and transportation planning processes. These resources can also be used in conjunction with the OSTI Scenario Planning Guidelines.

## THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNICATING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Communicating about climate change and climate action can be difficult. However, many communities are already engaged in climate action, sometimes without even realizing it. Many other community initiatives, such as creating communities with a mix of uses; encouraging more active, healthier residents; building streets that are safe for walking and biking; etc., can have the unintended benefit of also reducing greenhouse gas emissions. On a local level, Oregon communities have been making considered decisions on how to use land wisely and increasing transportation options for many years.



Photo courtesy of S. Millar

Still, it can be challenging to talk about why communities are doing these things, and how they relate to climate change. Many actions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions cut across a number of policy areas and are the responsibility of different agencies and departments, making cohesive communications a further challenge.

Fortunately, there are a number of best practices that can help local governments engage with citizens on climate action in a way that connects to community values and creates a participatory and meaningful process as local governments work together to reach local goals and targets.

In recent public opinion polls,<sup>1</sup> a majority of Americans recognize that climate change is occurring. And yet awareness has not translated significantly into concern and/or action. Many people view climate change as “far away” from their own lives, envisioning melting ice caps and stranded polar bears as its primary effects. They may believe the issue is too big and too distant for them to be able to do anything about it. They are both unaware of how climate change affects them personally, and that there are local and personal actions they can take to help solve it.

Transforming awareness into concern—and more importantly, into support and action—is fundamentally a communications challenge, and there is a growing body of research on effective climate change communication strategies. The best practices in this guide are drawn from that research.

Many of the assessments of climate change communications conducted on a national and regional level begin with an examination of what about the issue makes it difficult for people to personally engage with climate change. Key challenges include:

- **Invisibility/lack of immediacy.** Even at atmospherically significant levels, carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are not visible and do not have

direct negative health impacts on humans.<sup>ii</sup>

- **Sense of geographic remoteness.** The images of climate change most commonly employed by the media are melting glaciers and polar ice caps, leading most audiences to believe that global warming's impacts are only occurring in far-away places.<sup>iii</sup>
- **Time lags.** The human systems that contribute to climate change (transportation, emissions, coal power generation, etc.) will take years to change at a scale significant enough to impact levels of carbon in the atmosphere and mitigate climate change.<sup>iv</sup>
- **Skepticism.** During the 1980s and 90s, media coverage of climate change emphasized scientific uncertainty. Although there is now broad scientific consensus that climate change is occurring and that human behavior is the major contributor, the sense that the “jury is out” on climate change still lingers among the public, fueled by news stories that continue to present “counterpoint” views by the small minority of contrarian scientists, as well as the recent Climategate scandal.<sup>v</sup>
- **The “tragedy of the commons.”** The dilemma (coined by Garrett Hardin in 1968) is that people acting rationally in their own self-interest will deplete a shared limited resource because it is in no one's individual best interest to protect it, even though it is clear that all will suffer when the resource is gone.<sup>vi</sup>
- **“Finite pool of worry.”** This concept from behavioral psychology suggests that people can only worry about so many things at once, and as worry increases about one risk, concern about other risks lessens. Increasing concern about jobs and the economy crowds out concern about the environment.<sup>vii</sup>
- **Incorrect/limited assumptions about effects.** Surveys show that a large percentage of Americans are confused about the difference between weather and climate, and are largely unaware of the potential consequences of climate change beyond temperature/weather impacts.<sup>viii</sup> For example, few people recognize that public health impacts like water-, food- and insect-borne illnesses and disruptions in food supply are linked to climate change.<sup>ix</sup>



Photo courtesy of S. Millar

## BARRIERS TO ACTION

### *The “Say-Do” Gap*

Another common area of analysis in climate change communications are the barriers that prevent people from taking effective action to mitigate climate change even if they consider it a serious issue. Reasons for the “value-action” or “attitude-behavior” gap<sup>x</sup> include:

- **Structural constraints.** Even if people want to make climate-friendly choices, the options may be inconvenient, cost-prohibitive or unavailable. For example, a lack of direct public transit routes may necessitate a significantly longer commute time.<sup>xi</sup>
- **“Single action bias.”** Once people take one small action to address climate change, such as changing their light bulbs or purchasing an energy-efficient washing machine, they may actually be *less* likely to take additional actions because they feel they have already done their part.<sup>xii</sup>
- **Threats to values and self-interests.** Larger homes, larger cars and consumption in general are signs of status and financial well-being; shifting to a different way of living feels like a sacrifice under the prevailing value system.<sup>xiii</sup>
- **“Free rider” effect.** People consider it pointless to change their behavior because the vast majority of people are doing nothing.<sup>xiv</sup>
- **“Drop in a bucket” effect.** People believe that the problem is so large that individual action will not make a difference.

There is a clear consensus among experts that communication “for communications’ sake” is not enough; to drive change, messages and information must both increase motivation *and* lower the barriers to action.<sup>xv</sup>





## COMMUNICATION BEST PRACTICES

**1. Make climate change solutions local, relevant and urgent.** Because climate change is so often perceived as something far away, mentioning effects that have already occurred or are likely to occur in the near future—including changes to water supply, snow pack or local crops —can help people understand why they should care.

**2. Correct basic misperceptions.** The most common of these is the misperception that yesterday’s cold temperatures or a rainy summer disprove climate change. It is important to remind people of the difference between **weather** (what we see today or during a few weeks) and **climate** (what we can measure over decades).

**3. Use clear, consistent and non-technical language to explain the causes and effects of climate change.** There is widespread confusion among the public about the basic science of climate change. Without using technical language or getting lost in the details, communications should aim to establish a simple, baseline understanding of the causes of climate change among audiences. This will help them recognize the relationship between their own behavior and climate.

Recommended ways to talk about the science include:

- Employ a simple metaphor/analogy that explains how climate change happens (e.g., a “thickening blanket of heat” trapping carbon). This will provide people with a mental model of climate change that attributes it to the right cause (too much carbon) and triggers appropriate solutions (“I need to reduce the carbon I am producing.”)
- Use clear, non-scientific language and avoid scientific terms that may be potentially misleading because they have different “lay” meanings. For example, to some the word “theory” may be read as “hypothesis,” while to others, it may be read as “speculation.”
- Distinguish between weather (which changes from day to day) and climate (the accumulation of weather over many years) so people understand that short-term weather events are distinct from long-term climate change.
- Express concepts in a way that can be easily visualized. For example, when talking about “a ton of carbon,” a 2010 Honda Civic weighs about 2,700



pounds, or about 1 ¼ tons. So we can say that the weight of greenhouse gases our nation produces each year is equivalent to about 20 Honda Civics *per person*.<sup>xvi</sup>

- Use “climate change” rather than global warming. Although scientists have shown that the earth’s temperature is rising overall, climate change better conveys the broad range of actual and potential impacts (extreme weather events and droughts, as well as an overall increase in temperature).

Here is a sample narrative that employs these approaches:

“Our climate is being affected by the buildup of too much carbon in the atmosphere. This will change the kinds of crops we are able to grow, the amount of snow stored in our mountains, the trees that make up our forests, the kinds of wildlife that live here, and our water supply. The State of Oregon has adopted a scientific approach to climate change that is guided by the Climate Change Research Institute at Oregon State University. Guided by these experts, the state is working with local communities to transition to a sustainable, efficient energy future that will reduce the carbon in the air while creating economic opportunity.”



Photo courtesy of ODOT

**4. Connect climate change with the economy.** Economic concerns continue to dominate the national political agenda and personal household concerns. While addressing climate change will cost money, it will also bring economic benefits on both a large and small scale. Solutions to climate change include increasing the energy efficiency of vehicles and buildings, creating jobs in fast-growing industries like renewable energy, reducing the amount that businesses and citizens pay for fuel and becoming a regional leader in emerging markets for clean technology.

Avoiding addressing climate change may mean that local communities miss out on economic opportunity and success, or spend resources inefficiently because they are not taking changing conditions into consideration. Your community may already have examples of businesses that are benefiting from clean technology, renewable energy or energy efficiency. Invite them to be a part of your public discussions on addressing climate change. For example, many employers support and participate in Transportation Demand Management (TDM) programs, and some employers, like Sysco, require eco-driving training for their delivery drivers.



I-205 Multi-Use Path community tree planting event  
Photo courtesy of Friends of Trees

More research is needed on the direct effects of climate action and local economies, and we encourage local governments to look for—and use—that research as it becomes available.

**5. Align messaging with supportive infrastructure changes.** Encouraging residents to walk or bike if there are no sidewalks and no bike paths means your efforts are unlikely to promote behavior change. Where possible, messages focusing on behavior change should be delivered in tandem with improvements to supporting infrastructure.

**6. Tap into people’s identities.** People often make decisions based upon the frame of mind that is most prevalent for them at that time (e.g., “parent,” “citizen,” “employee,” “Oregonian.”) By appealing to them in language that maps to their current frame of mind (for example, addressing parents with messages about the importance of preserving our quality of life for our children) you will better connect with their values and beliefs.

**7. Communicate through trusted, local sources and reach people through their existing networks.** Research has shown that people are often more willing to change behaviors because their neighbor or a colleague is doing something, than if they just hear a message from someone they don’t know. Utilizing the networks of existing business, neighborhood, school and religious groups can often be more effective than trying to reach people alone.

**8. Consider your audience.** Each audience within a community, despite holding similar values, has slightly different needs. Some questions to consider: How much background or understanding are they likely to have about the issue? What type of information is most important to them (e.g., economic benefits, transportation, health)? Given what you know about the group, how can you convey information about your community’s plans that will be meaningful (in person, via email, social media, etc.)?



Photo courtesy of S. Millar

**9. Lead with outcomes and benefits.** As you communicate about changes in how your community may look and work in a low-carbon future, it’s important to stress broader community goals and explain how the process you are engaging in now will help achieve desired community outcomes. In fact, depending upon your audience’s interest, you may want to lead with the community benefits when starting your dialogue. For example, initiating a climate action plan in or changes to transportation or land use planning and projects might result in more sidewalks and bike paths or more access to transit, achieving a broader community goal of “walkability” and enabling residents to walk or bike to stores, entertainment and jobs. Communicating the goals and the benefits/outcomes allows people to understand how their community might improve, and to think creatively about how to reach goals, stimulating more conversation and helpful input.

**10. Listen and document.** Reducing greenhouse gas emissions will be a long and challenging process, requiring many levels of feedback and program adjustment as we move into the future. Oregon communities would be wise to capture public feedback and ideas and to document best practices in their own communities. This information can be used to revise and improve existing programs in your own community, as well as help provide a model of success for other communities interested in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, involving their citizens and designing programs and actions that work.

**11. Celebrate local success.** Much good work has already been accomplished at the local level to create more livable, healthy communities that are reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Using local examples of climate-smart development and transportation systems that are already making a difference can help citizens imagine how planned changes and projects will benefit them in the future.

**12. Make actions accessible.** Breaking big solutions down into bite-sized pieces is also helpful; accompany climate change information with clear direction on specific actions that people can take so they feel empowered to act, rather than overwhelmed by the scope of the problem.

## Celebrate Local Success

Safe Routes to School is a federally funded program that encourages children to walk and bike to school. It has two funding components, one addressing infrastructure barriers, such as lack of sidewalks, the other education and empowerment. The national Safe Routes to School Website has several [Oregon success stories](#) online including programs in Corvallis, Eugene, Independence and Portland.



Safe Routes to School  
Photo courtesy of ODOT

## USE MULTI-CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS

In today's diverse and disparate media and communications environment, the influence of single media outlets (the daily newspaper, the local television news) has waned. Many people are choosing their own news online through self-selected websites or blogs, or are getting their news from their friends on social networks. This trend requires that organizations work differently to get information out.

It also means that public sector organizations must think strategically about how to communicate. Here are some general guidelines for increasing the reach of your communications about climate change:

- **Use traditional advertising sparingly and strategically.** Instead of creating and buying space for advertisements, consider using videography that can be shared virally on the web on social networking sites or on your own website. Consider affordable digital ads on social networking sites as a way to reach younger, more tech-savvy audiences.
- **Use your website or social network site as a 'hub' for communications.** Update it often and use other communications channels to drive people there.
- **Create content that can be shared.** This could be online content that can be used on social networking sites, or it could be paper brochures that are shared at neighborhood meetings. In either case, people are receiving the information from their friends, neighbors or colleagues.
- **Reach people when they're in the right frame of mind.** Traditional advertising can't be targeted to reach people when they are about to make a decision that has a climate impact. Distributing a walk and bike map to someone's door can have a far greater effect than a billboard they may see as they drive by, after they've already made a decision about how to get to work.
- **Make invisible behavior visible.** Figure out ways to visibly reward people for making a change—yard signs, buttons, widgets on Facebook—as a way for citizens to demonstrate their actions and for others to see them doing so.



Pedestrians in Ashland  
Photo courtesy Cogan Owens Cogan, LLC

## COMMUNICATE USING LOCAL VALUES AND LOCAL BENEFITS

A number of community and environmental benefits can be achieved through the same actions and programs that you might implement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These are sometimes referred to as “co-benefits.” The benefits and co-benefits important to your community members will depend upon your local values and goals. Therefore, in talking about greenhouse gas reductions, it’s helpful to communicate the benefits that align with your own community’s values, vision and goals. The more these benefits and co-benefits can be demonstrated through examples and/or data (e.g., public health benefits, job creation, lower transportation costs), the higher quality your discussion.

Benefits include:

- Better health
- Less time in traffic
- Cleaner air
- More jobs
- Vibrant local businesses and business districts
- More opportunities to walk and bike
- More green spaces and parks
- Trails and paths connecting neighborhoods, shopping
- More transit options
- Energy independence
- Regional leadership
- Economic resilience
- Preservation of open spaces



Farmers Market  
Photo courtesy Cogan Owens Cogan, LLC

## LEVERAGE EXISTING PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESSES

Oregon communities have a well-established tradition of public engagement. This has given citizens high expectation for meaningful and productive opportunities to engage in dialogue about community issues.

Most Oregon communities have existing stakeholder/public involvement processes and tools for involving citizens in land use and transportation planning. Your community can leverage current public involvement processes and tools to begin a discussion about the benefits, costs and effects of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Opportunities to do this include when:

- Considering Urban Growth Boundary decisions
- Updating your Transportation System Plan or Regional Transportation Plan
- Updating your community's Comprehensive Plan or Zoning Ordinance
- Initiating or unveiling a construction project that reduces idling or Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT)
- Engaging in Scenario Planning
- Planning to implement Toolkit actions or programs



Photo courtesy of Cogan Owens Cogan, LLC/ODOT

## A robust public process on the ground—timelines and tactics

Engage the right people at the right time. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed a spectrum to help users assess the objective of their public involvement program. Sometimes, efforts are simply informational. Other times, they are meant to more deeply engage, help influence policy or take on new behaviors. As you begin your effort, discuss and clarify your objectives for the engagement effort. This will help you choose the right tools at the right time.

### IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
To provide the public with balance and objective information to assist them in understanding the program, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

©International Association for Public Participation, 2007, reprinted with permission

For suggested techniques and tools for each of these stages, see <https://www.iap2.org/>

How you prepare for discussion with your audience depends on what level of participation you want from them.

- **Make the conversation visible.** Establish people responsible for further contact, such as staff and/or those on your advisory boards (e.g., Planning Commission) and City Council/County Commission.
- **Describe why your local government is engaging in this effort,** and connect to the values of your own community.



- **Consider and answer the frequently asked questions** that come up in your community. Use these questions and answers to guide your communications planning and implementation.
- **Tie this program to adopted vision, goals, and objectives** for your community. For example, goals that relate to transportation choice, health, a vibrant local economy, etc.
- **Engage stakeholders at the outset;** develop and maintain these relationships throughout the planning process; document and respond to concerns.
- **Don't be afraid to repeat the "why"** your community is engaged in this effort; connect it to the importance of community planning and the outcomes of planning (e.g. more livable, healthy communities).



## COMMUNICATE WHY WE CARE

Across our state, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) is responsible for over 19,000 lane miles of state highway, 2,700 bridges, thousands of culverts, and other critical infrastructure. All parts of our road system are potentially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Already, ODOT has experienced maintenance costs associated with increase in potentially climate-related extreme weather events.<sup>xvii</sup>

For example, between 1995 and 2000 approximately \$22.3 million was spent on landslide repairs along highway US 101, much of which was repair work performed under emergency conditions.<sup>xviii</sup>

Incidences of landslides, flooding, windstorms and other extreme weather events are projected to increase due to climate change. In most cases, the maintenance expenditures associated with things like landslides and rock falls does not go towards permanent stabilization of slopes and preventing future slides, but only towards clearing an emergency. Consequently, maintenance costs will keep rising over time as slopes continue to fail. Similar conclusions can be drawn for the other types of maintenance that ODOT performs. The more ODOT has to spend of its resources on reacting to emergency situations, the fewer funds are available for preventing or preparing for future events. In a time of tightening budgets, this dynamic cannot be ignored.

Similar conclusions can be drawn for infrastructure in every community. Being prepared, thinking ahead, and taking steps to avert problems is wise fiscal management.

**Climate Change**—any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or as a result of human activity (IPCC, 2007).

**Mitigation**—any action taken to eliminate or reduce the long-term risk and hazards of climate change (IPCC, 2007).

**Adaptation**—the adjustment in natural or human systems to a new or changing environment caused by climate change (IPCC, 2007).



US101, January 19, 2012 slide – ODOT photo

### Some Anticipated Impacts

- 2-4 feet of sea level rise by 2100, leading to coastal erosion.
- \$500 is the lost value for single truck delayed 24 hours.
- By 2080 annual temperature projected to increase by 2.7 - 10.4°F, leading to changes in plants, animals, and pests.
- Warmer winters mean less snow pack and more flooding.

From ODOT's Adaptation Interim Strategy



## CONCLUSION

It will take all of us working together to successfully reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Oregon and address the challenges of climate change. The good news is that Oregon's communities are already leading the way with powerful local examples of positive changes that are improving local economies and Oregonians' quality of life. The guidelines in this document are one resource to help your communities efforts succeed. Further information, tools and resources are available on the [Oregon Sustainable Transportation Initiative website](#).

**Endnotes:**

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- <sup>ii</sup>Ibid, 4.
- <sup>iii</sup>Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, Roser-Renouf, C., and Smith, N. *Global Warming's Six Americas, June 2010*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University and George Mason University, June 2010), 49.
- <sup>iv</sup>Moser, S., and Dilling, L. "Introduction." In *Creating a Climate for Change: Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press), 6.
- <sup>v</sup>Pike, C., and Herr., M. *Climate Crossroads: A Research-Based Framing Guide*. (The Topos Partnership, 2009), 7.
- <sup>vi</sup> Moser and Dilling, 7.
- <sup>vii</sup>Shome and Marx, 21.
- <sup>viii</sup>Leiserowitz, et al, 4.
- <sup>ix</sup>Leiserowitz, A. "Communicating the risks of global warming: American risk perceptions, affective images, and interpretive communities." In *Creating a Climate for Change: Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change*, edited by Moser, S., and Dilling, L. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press), 50.
- <sup>x</sup>Ockwell, D., Whitmarsh, L., and O'Neill, S. "Reorienting Climate Change Communication for Successful Mitigation," *Science Communication* 30 (2009), 310.
- <sup>xi</sup>Ibid, 308.
- <sup>xii</sup>Shome and Marx, 21.
- <sup>xiii</sup>Ockwell, et al, 308.
- <sup>xiv</sup>Ibid, 311.
- <sup>xv</sup> Moser and Dilling, 494.
- <sup>xvi</sup>*Cool Planning: A Handbook on Local Strategies to Slow Climate Change*, Oregon Transportation and Growth Management Program (2010).
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Interim ODOT Climate Change Adaptation Strategy Report*, Oregon Department of Transportation (2011)
- <sup>xviii</sup> Landslide and Rock fall Program: 2012-2015 State Transportation Improvement Program Report," Oregon Department of Transportation, ODOT.