

# chapter 1 take action, take advantage: an introduction by King County Executive Ron Sims

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In the spring of 2005 I asked my staff to put together a major conference on climate change. The purpose of the conference was not to consider the extent of greenhouse gas pollution or to explore new and alternative ways to generate clean, sustainable energy, although those endeavors have long been a focus of our work in King County. Rather, the purpose of the conference was to find ways to prepare our communities to adapt to a different world, a world of warmer temperatures and less predictable weather patterns; a world that has, in many ways, already arrived.

The idea of holding such a conference came to me after reading an editorial by Dr. Peter Ward, a professor of Geological Sciences at the University of Washington (*Seattle Times*, 2004). Dr. Ward discussed the important role that paleontologists play in our efforts to address climate change, arguing that we cannot ignore the lessons of our past. These lessons highlight how delicate our ecosystems are, especially in context of climate change and the catastrophic consequences that have resulted from seemingly small changes to the world's climate.

In King County, we have been attentive to this delicate balance for some time now. Because of the expected harmful effects of climate change on this region, we have chosen to develop expertise in preparing our community for these changes. Many of our region's problems and our proposed solutions are outlined in our 2007 King County Climate Plan. The experience of our team in developing the Climate Plan is the foundation for this guidebook.

The message of Dr. Ward's editorial and other similar commentaries on climate change is clear: ignore the effects of climate change at your own peril. So, as the leader of the fourteenth largest county government in the United States of America, I became determined to develop new ways to get the word out about preparing for this crisis. I decided that a national conference on the subject was long overdue.

## **"The Future Ain't What It Used To Be" Conference on Climate Change**

In planning for the conference, "The Future Ain't What it Used to Be" (titled with respect to a famous Yogi Berra quote), we estimated that no more than 300 people would attend. We solicited leaders from public, private and not-for-profit organizations from across the nation. By the time the conference was ready to begin in October 2005, it was booked to capacity with over 700 people registered to participate. We had to stagger the attendance during the day to remain in compliance with the Seattle Fire Department's building capacity limitations. We had struck a chord of latent concern and people responded. That concern grows stronger every year.

Seven break-out sessions of the conference focused on a wide range of climate change effects, including impacts to hydropower, municipal water supplies, agriculture, and wastewater treatment. Because King County is an urban coastal region and an important port for the nation's fisheries and



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maritime trade, we also convened experts on sea level rise, shoreline impacts, and consequences to fish and shellfish. Participants were hungry to receive both practical real life strategies as well broad based policy ideas, and we started those conversations.

The media was also very engaged. In the same month as the conference, a story broke that explained in some detail how the Pacific Northwest would be a region significantly impacted by the effects of climate change (*Seattle Times* October 9, 2005). The conference was then covered by Seattle's major daily papers as well as a national news wire (*Seattle Times* October 28, 2005; *Associated Press* October 28, 2005).

Our keynote speaker was former New Jersey Governor and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christine Todd Whitman, who expressed that meaningful federal limits on greenhouse gases were a necessary component of an overall emissions reduction program. She spoke eloquently of the role that local municipalities and states can and must play in the battle against climate change. I could not agree more.

The conference has had ripple effects that we keep seeing even now. At the close of the event we were flooded with requests to make the information discussed at the plenary and break-out sessions available on the King County website. The conference also served as the impetus for the State of Washington to commission a report on the economic impacts of climate change to water supplies, forestry, fisheries, agriculture and other sectors important to Washington's economy.

Perhaps most importantly, the idea for this guidebook was born from the great enthusiasm for additional knowledge, collaborative strategies, and shared resources that flowed from this conference. Soon after the conference ended, we gathered a climate team made up of county employees to start planning for climate change, and to record our experiences in this guidebook. Then, working with our conference partners from the Climate Impacts Group at the University of Washington, we quickly launched a writing collaboration.

Not surprisingly, ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability has joined with us and published the guidebook. No organization is doing more on the international scene than ICLEI in providing technical and policy assistance, peer networking opportunities, and general expertise to local governments on climate change emissions reductions. Now ICLEI has launched its new Climate Resilient Communities Program, which will provide assistance to local governments on preparing for climate change impacts. This guidebook will serve as a valuable resource for communities participating in the Climate Resilient Communities Program. Together with ICLEI and the Climate Impacts Group, King County is committed to making preparedness for climate change a critical part of how local, regional and state governments think about the future.

## Mitigate and Adapt

But let me reaffirm that reducing or “mitigating” greenhouse gas pollution is a top priority for King County government. We have to address the cause of the problem so that we do not exacerbate its effects. In essence, mitigation is our number one preparedness strategy. If we do not stop the growth of and eventually reverse greenhouse gas emissions, then our opportunity to adapt will be limited by the rapid pace of climate change.

As a result of the critical importance of mitigation, there was a time, not long ago, when it was not acceptable to talk about adapting to – or preparing for – climate change. The reasoning was that time spent preparing for or adapting to the harmful effects of greenhouse gas pollution would divert resources from the essential need to reduce the emissions of those gases.

Even as I write these words, there are still many people who are reluctant to talk about specific adaptation or preparedness policies. But as responsible public leaders, we cannot afford the luxury of not preparing. We know now that some impacts are inevitable and we know that these impacts will affect many of the essential services and functions that our governments are expected to provide. We must prepare for the impacts underway while we work to avoid even worse future effects.

What about the perception that mitigation and adaptation activities compete against one another for resources and attention? While it may be true that preparing for climate change will call on resources that are useful for mitigation, it is just as likely that an open discussion about what is needed to prepare for the harmful effects of climate change will inspire action to reduce greenhouse gas pollution. Reality is a powerful motivator. This was, in fact, one of the findings of a 2006 Yale conference on climate change (Abbasi 2006). The reality of failing levees, melting snowpack, and rising coastlines is a powerful motivator. Proposing to make investments to shore up those levees, build reclaimed water systems to offset melting snowcaps, build higher seawalls, and protect shoreline communities will even more effectively bring the perils of climate change into the public eye.

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That has been my experience. King County is making multi-million dollar investments to address these scenarios, including construction of a reclaimed water system and reconstruction of critical levees across the region. In each case, those adaptive infrastructure investments have helped – and not detracted from – our efforts to promote greenhouse gas mitigation policies, because they have raised the profile of the climate change problem. Our recent voter approved tax proposal to increase King County’s transit system is proof of this. King County’s transit initiative is a powerful mitigation strategy, given that automobiles in our region are the greatest contributor to greenhouse gas pollution.

Moreover, and perhaps even more importantly, as public leaders and public servants who have assumed the responsibility for the health, safety, and welfare of our citizens, we have a professional and moral obligation to prepare our communities for climate change. The climate is changing. There is much at risk. We must begin to prepare for these changes.

## The Challenge of Our Generation and Opportunity of A Lifetime

Climate change is one of the greatest threats our society has ever faced. The atmospheric balance that sustains our lives is incredibly fragile, and the damage people are doing to it will have drastic consequences. These consequences cross racial, ethnic, religious, economic, and political boundaries. On a global scale under a “business as usual” scenario, the scientific prognosis is dire. The world and its people will experience:

- more poverty
- more hunger
- more disease
- more drought
- more flooding

No person, people, or nation will be spared. Only the degree by which we will have to adapt is in question.

And if ever there was an issue in the public domain that cried out for the involvement of our younger generation in this great country it is climate change. Every time I hear someone say “that new energy policy is just too expensive” or “we don’t have the money to build a more robust levee system right now” I wonder how the next generation of Americans would calculate those costs.

However, climate change is also the greatest *opportunity* our society and world has ever faced. If we do what it takes to reduce greenhouse gas pollution to safe levels and prepare for the impacts that we see are underway, we will transform the economic foundation of modern civilization and can seize the opportunity to realize better health, social justice, and sustainable economic development throughout the world. We have the choice to act, and we must.

Solutions to this crisis vary from the simple to the complex – from changing light bulbs to comprehensive international “cap and trade” regulations. Likewise, preparedness solutions range from water conservation programs to regional flood control zoning districts. But at the heart of the crisis – driving our need for any of these solutions – is the world’s reliance on fossil fuels for energy.

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Our addiction to fossil fuels promotes dependence on foreign oil, which compromises national security. Our addiction to fossil fuels also undermines our efforts to create new markets in clean, sustainable forms of energy.

The co-benefits of reducing dependency on fossil fuels are profound. New advances in renewable energy, architectural design, sustainable building materials, 21st century urban planning that strategically locates where we live, work and play in one geographic, pedestrian friendly community are just a few elements of this bright new future. Others include the new role agriculture is playing in the production of sustainable energy, and the critical importance of growing and purchasing local food as a strategy for building sustainable communities.

The potential benefits of growth in much-needed living wage jobs are no less significant. We have endless opportunities to create domestic jobs as we build and redesign our homes and buildings to be energy efficient and sustainable, and as we construct our physical infrastructure to be climate resilient. Similarly, the opportunities to develop jobs by stimulating markets in clean energy technologies such as wind, solar, geothermal and biofuels are limited only by our imagination and our collective determination to create real change.

These benefits are immediately relevant on a local level. For example here in Washington, roughly \$30 million is spent each day on oil and gas. Most of that money leaves the state, contributing nothing to local economic development. By investing in biofuels made from crops grown in Washington, we can keep more of those energy dollars in the state, help local farmers, and create new jobs. Economic opportunities like those that we will realize in Washington can exist in every region of our country.

At the same time, taking the opportunity to adapt to climate change impacts will also bring benefits, if we act now. We can protect our valuable homes and families from flooding if we act now. In some regions of the world, we can also capture new agricultural opportunities, if we observe changes in crop patterns based on new average temperatures and precipitation patterns.

## A Call to Action

Whether you view climate change as a crisis, an opportunity, or both, it is a reality. This guidebook is about how to take immediate action, to adapt effectively to that reality. The time to delay, defer, or deny is over. We must act.

I am eager to help build a more optimistic future – one of peace and prosperity. But I am also grounded by the fact that we must prepare our communities right now for the harmful impacts that we know are coming.

As Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “A hundred years after we are gone and forgotten, those who never heard of us will be living with the results of our actions.” Likewise, I will not be here in the Puget Sound region in 50 years, but 2.5 million people will be. The actions my community takes today will affect how climate change impacts those 2.5 million residents.

Foresight and preparedness are good government. They are the essence of what we do as leaders. The steps we take now to anticipate and get ready for climate change will have profound impacts on the world our children and grandchildren inherit.

Whether you are a public official like I am, an advisor to a regional government, or an agency staff member, this guidebook offers you a framework for starting to prepare for climate change. In the pages that follow you will discover a critical tool – in essence, a road map for actions – that your government organization can put in place today to help prepare your community to adapt to a changing climate. The actions you take now will have significant impacts for generations to come.

I hope this guidebook takes the mystery out of planning for climate change. I hope it inspires you.

And I hope your leadership is rewarded with a stronger, safer community that is prepared for the greatest threat and the greatest opportunity we will ever face.



**Ron Sims**

King County, Washington