



Local Authorities as Leaders in the Transatlantic Climate and Energy Dialogue

Dale Medearis

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The rapid and surprise collapse last week of the Lieberman-Warner cap-and-trade climate bill suggests that U.S. national-level efforts to address climate change will be more difficult and long-term than most anyone realized. Regardless whether the next U.S. President is Barack Obama or John McCain, the speed of Warner-Lieberman's collapse makes clear that implementation of meaningful climate and energy policies in the United States has been set back for a while.

Local Action Strengthening Transatlantic Learning

Responding to rapidly increasing energy prices and creating consequential climate change policies seem too overwhelming to address in any substantive fashion over the short-term. Warner-Lieberman's demise and the absence of any realistic short-term policy solutions also means that climate and energy can remain potentially problematic issues between the U.S. and Germany. As preparations start for COP-15 in September 2009, differences between the United States, Germany and the rest of the world, are likely to grow wider over frustrations that a new presidential administration is unable to quickly introduce substantive climate and energy policies.

Until real and actionable climate and energy policies emerge at the national level in the United States, the burden of addressing sustainable climate and energy work will fall on the shoulders of local and regional authorities. The central role that local governments are likely to play, offer several positive opportunities for dealing with climate change and bridging differences in the transatlantic environmental relationship. It also introduces substantial challenges that require thoughtful consideration and attention.

Cities and Regions as Leaders in Implementing Sustainable Climate and Energy Policies

Opportunities to promote long-term cooperation include the common challenges that U.S. and German cities and metropolitan regions confront in addressing climate change, energy, mobility, habitat, and economic development. In both countries local authorities are the true first-responders to climate change. Approximately 70 percent

of greenhouse gas emissions emanate from the transportation and building sectors – sectors that are intricately tied to land-use management and therefore, heavily dependent on oversight and involvement of local authorities. Moreover, most German cities such as Freiburg, Stuttgart, or Hamburg offer their U.S. colleagues a wealth of lessons in applying multimodal transportation systems, energy-efficient housing, renewable energies and other “green” buildings programs.

Buildings

Energy-efficient housing and buildings offer exceptional opportunities in which German cities can share lessons with their American counterparts. More than 70 percent of electricity and 40 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in both countries emanate from the built environment. In addition, a recent McKinsey study pointed to energy efficiency in general, but building retrofits in particular, as among the fastest, most cost-effective and environmentally beneficial short-term policy alternatives for addressing climate. Germany’s experiences with energy labels, publicly financed low-interest loans and performance standards can positively inform U.S. energy efficiency efforts in the building sector.

Transportation

Transportation is the other critical variable in the climate puzzle and accounts for approximately 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in most U.S. and German cities. Recent studies now suggest that the new federal fleet fuel economy increase to 35 miles per gallon for cars and light trucks alone is unlikely to cut emissions of CO₂ from mobile sources over the long-term as vehicles miles traveled are likely to increase. Even as gas prices go beyond \$4.00 per gallon and ridership in public transit increases, local authorities in the U.S. will have no choice but to continue to integrate land-use and transportation into climate and energy planning efforts. Here again, German cities can inform their U.S. counterparts. In many German cities and regions, it is common to see 50 percent of trips taken on public transit, bikes, or walking. By comparison, leading regions in the U.S., such as Washington, D.C. seldom crack 20 percent of trips on public transit, bike or foot.

Renewable Energy

Another sector fertile for transatlantic learning among local authorities is renewable energy and the role of community-energy planning. Germany is not only a pioneer in the development of solar, wind and renewable heating and cooling energy systems. Germany also is a leader in planning mixed-use, transit-oriented development, with applications of renewable energies in large-scale and geographically defined

districts – what is now recognized as community energy planning. Local authorities in the United States often struggle to create actionable energy and climate plans because they lack sufficient consideration of scale beyond the level of the individual house, building or street. U.S. cities can take advantage of the community energy planning lessons from cities such as Mannheim, Stuttgart and Berlin.

The Need for a Focused Approach

But the obstacles hindering transfer between U.S. and Germany cities can be significant. With some exceptions, international cooperation, particularly at the local level, is often viewed suspiciously because of the perceived lack of domestic benefits. Much of this has to do with the fact that international work in the United States often focuses on the export of policies, ideas and technologies from the United States to developing countries. Alternatively, when urban planners or environmentalists work with countries such as Germany, it is often performed in accidental contexts that lack sustained goal-oriented, problem-focused searches and analysis. Local environmentalists and planners in the U.S. often lack information about the content and performance about Germany's energy, climate, building and transportation innovations and they seldom assess prospective transfer opportunities.

Formalizing Cooperation

Formalizing cooperation between local authorities in Germany and the U.S. can start with sustained and focused searches, reviews and analysis of German climate and energy policies. Evidence is emerging that suggests learning by local governments in the U.S. is enhanced when the local policymakers have access to information about the content and performance of the imported policies. The same evidence points to accelerated transfer of imported policies into the U.S. when policymakers assess adoption potential. Such an effort is currently underway between the Northern Virginia Regional Commission and counterpart regional planning councils in Stuttgart and Hamburg. A declaration of cooperation on climate and energy has been signed and a long-term cooperative climate and energy policy transfer project is now being implemented. The goal of the cooperation is to inform development and implementation of Northern Virginia's community-energy and climate planning by drawing from the experiences and success of parallel efforts in Hamburg, Stuttgart and other German cities.

Given current trends affecting national-level climate and energy policies in the United States, substantive action seems unlikely over the short and possibly long-term. In the interim, the serious work to address climate and energy in the U.S. is to be seen among local authorities. Fortunately, this also happens to be the level at which the U.S. and Germany can pursue very solid and mutually beneficial cooperation.

Dale Medearis, Ph.D., (dmedearis@novaregion.org) is the senior environmental planner for the Northern Virginia Regional Commission. He supervises the Commission's climate and energy programs, and its international partnerships with Europe.