

COOL COMMUNITIES

50+ ideas for community engagement
on climate action



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DEFINITIONS

Community engagement is the process of encouraging and supporting action at home and in our communities. Those actions can include participating in the democratic process, consumer preferences, lifestyle choices, and community enhancement.

Community engagement on climate action focuses on actions that support the transition to a low-carbon future. Those actions include:

- Education and awareness of climate change and climate solutions
- Participation in consultation processes and planning for climate action
- Actions that have direct and measurable results in reducing carbon emissions or adapting to climate change
- Actions that have social and economic co-benefits while reducing carbon emissions or adapting to climate change
- Actions that contribute to a low-carbon lifestyle and economy

A community is a group of people sharing a common space or bond. This paper focuses primarily on geographic communities such as urban neighbourhoods, towns, villages, or rural communities. The ideas presented herein are also adaptable and applicable to other kinds of communities, including First Nations, cultures, faiths, professions, and others.

ENGAGE



Community engagement is arguably the most **essential** and **complex** part of any climate plan. It can also be the **easiest**. It all depends on how you approach it.

What make community engagement so essential for addressing climate change is that no climate plan can survive without it. Ongoing support for political leadership requires not only an engaged constituency but also a broad public perception of social benefit. Climate action needs to help us save money, create good jobs, and improve our quality of life. If it fails to do so, the public commitment to climate action can be as fleeting as the next election.

Climate change may be the most significant environmental issue facing humanity, but acting on climate change is a social issue. People react more to personal experience than scientific fact, which means that climate plans need to help people adapt to climate change and extreme weather, as well as adopt new technology and lifestyle choices that will improve their lives at the same time as they lower our carbon footprint. Climate action must also lead to social benefit.

What makes the process complex is that we are attempting to influence millions of individual voluntary decisions through a multitude of volunteers and voluntary organizations. The process is inherently organic and messy.

Funding for community engagement is cyclical, especially for environmental causes. Community funding rises as governments grapple with environmental causes – most notably the federal Green Plan in 1990 in response to the call for sustainable development, and energy conservation following the North American blackout of 2003 – but the funding rarely lasts more than a few years after the political urgency of the issue has dissipated.

Compounding the difficulties is the changing relationship between governments and community groups. Governments are increasingly driven by tight mandates and fiscal accountability, whereas volunteers and voluntary sector organizations are driven by causes primarily associated with the betterment of their community or the environment. There is overlap, but the gap between government and community has been steadily widening over the past three decades as governments have shifted from mission-based funding to project funding, and with an ever-tighter focus on reporting quantifiable results.

Little wonder that community engagement is often overlooked.

What makes community engagement simple is that our communities are already engaged.

As Canadians, we all want our homes, our community, and our country to be a great place to live. We are active in our communities, and we volunteer through a myriad of community groups and activities. Most communities have between twenty to fifty community groups that can reach every resident several times over. These groups form strong bonds in the community and they provide many essential services. Community volunteerism runs deep, and that is a powerful force.

Community engagement for climate action does not need to invent a new wheel, it merely needs to nudge the wheel that is already in motion. A series of strategic initiatives and investments may be all that is needed to integrate climate action into an already strong force for building strong communities.

Here's what we have working in our favour:

1. Compact and complete communities are widely recognized as a foundation for the transition to a low-carbon future;
2. Climate action can have significant co-benefits for saving money, improving health, job creation and quality of life;
3. Carbon pricing can inject significant new funding into community engagement and enhancement.

It seems that, with climate change and carbon pricing, we actually have the opportunity to rebuild the social contract between governments and communities, and between funders and volunteers. We have the opportunity to involve voluntary sector groups (both large and small) as active partners in the climate movement.

This guide covers community engagement from both the perspectives of provincial and municipal engagement strategies, corporate and foundation leadership, and community organizing. There are over 50 ideas – ways to reshape our future from the ground up.

Top down: strategic actions by government that will have a significant impact in empowering and supporting community action

Bottom up: ways to organize, advocate, plan, engage, support, and act in your community

In between: strategic action by foundations, organizations, companies and others that can stimulate community action.

THIS IS CLIMATE ACTION

In the end, climate action is about finding ways to live a great life without using a lot of fossil energy.

There is no shortage of ideas, of ways to live better with less.

Some of them are obvious:

- energy conservation
- green power
- public transit
- electric vehicles
- safe cycling
- local food

Others may be less obvious, but are equally important in that they are part of a culture that emphasizes quality of life over consumption:

- reading
- arts and culture
- sport and recreation
- local parks

Arts, sports, and culture may not be eligible for carbon funding, but there is absolutely no reason why we shouldn't celebrate every single low-carbon activity that makes our lives great.

Community engagement helps people take action – in their own way and for their own reasons. And when enough people act, we will get to the future we want, instead of the future we fear.



Figure 1. shows the flow from key climate priorities down to individual and societal benefits.

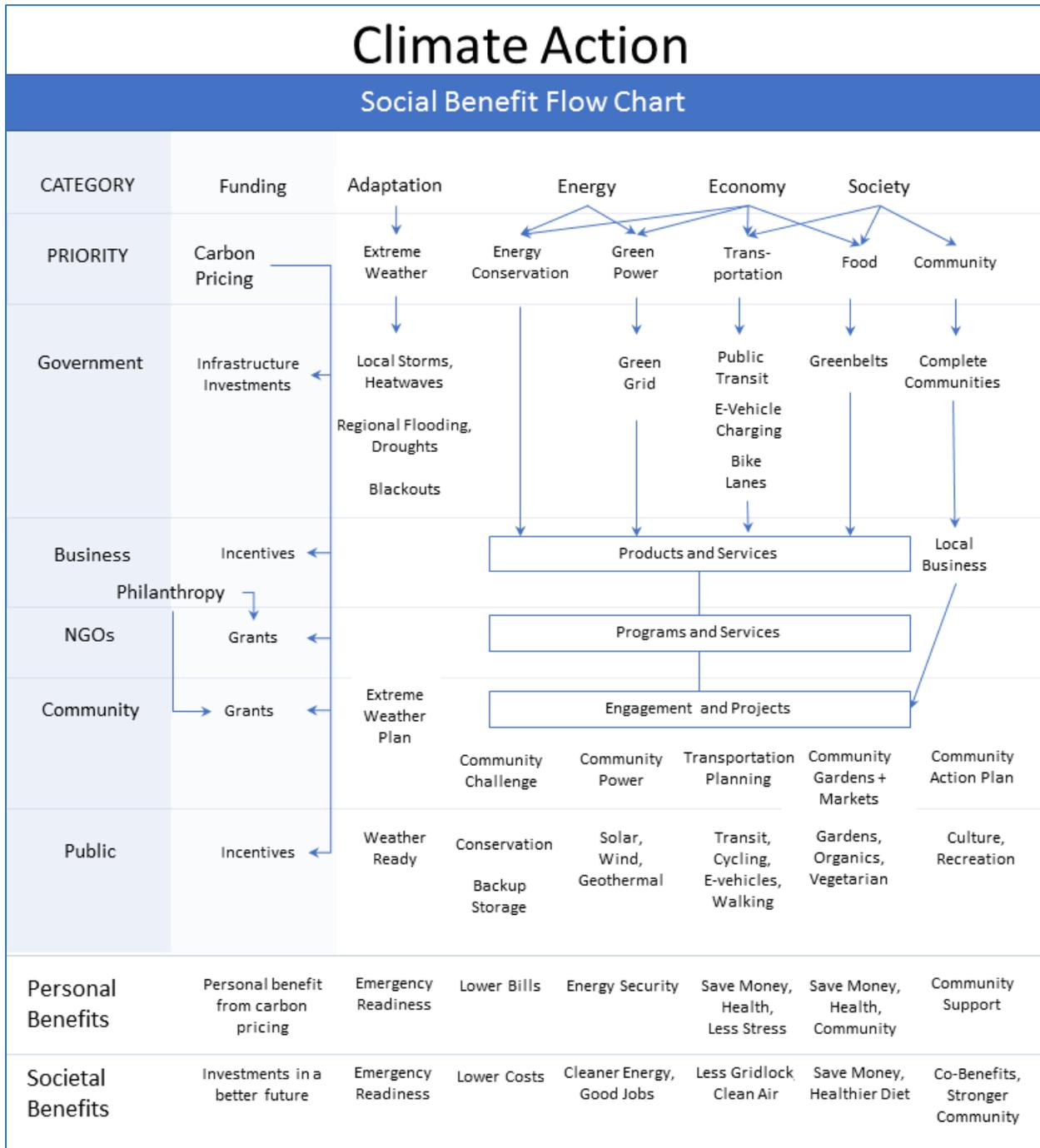


Figure 1: Social Benefit and Climate Action

50+ NEAT IDEAS



Here are over fifty ideas for community engagement, including top-down actions in climate plans, bottom-up organizing, and in-between support programs.

Each one of these ideas could take up an entire guide or report. The goal here is to show the potential for community action, and the importance of designing an overall strategy.

Links to examples or resources have been provided for many of the ideas, however a simple Google search will come up with numerous examples, many of them in your own backyard. The examples are largely drawn from my own experience in Toronto and Ontario, and I would welcome hearing about other ideas and case studies to include in future editions.

TOP DOWN

Strategic government leadership empowers individual and community action.

1

Integrated Vision

Have a clear vision of what a low-carbon society and economy will look like, and how we will get there. Show how acting on climate change can also lead to an improved quality of life and a sustainable economy.

2

Carbon Pricing and Social Benefit

Where the revenue from carbon pricing (whether through a carbon tax or revenue from cap and trade) is used to promote climate solutions, designate significant funding for measures that have direct social benefit as well as reduce carbon (see below and the social benefits diagram on page 5).

3

Green Infrastructure

Invest in infrastructure projects that will protect people from extreme weather and a changing climate (such as stormwater retention and flood control), and that will support a low-carbon lifestyle (including public transit, electric vehicle charging, and the transmission and storage of decentralized renewable power).

4

Public Incentives

Provide a complete suite of incentives to promote carbon reduction and climate adaptation, including adopting new technology and behaviours as well as ongoing support for low-carbon lifestyle. In particular, have incentives for each of the major categories of climate action for adaptation (extreme weather) and mitigation (home energy conservation, renewable power, transportation, and food).

5

Social Infrastructure Support

Establish an office of community engagement, including community animation and funding support for community organizing and planning.

6

Community Project Grants

Earmark funding for community-led projects, including fast-track approvals for approved activities (see the list of community projects and campaigns).

7

Integration

Enhance collaboration between ministries and funds to take advantage of co-benefits and to streamline government support and funding for communities and community groups. Develop a co-benefit exchange program within government funds to provide simplified funding applications for the voluntary sector. A community garden, for example, has multiple

benefits – deal with the complexity at the government level, and let them get on with the job of growing food.

8

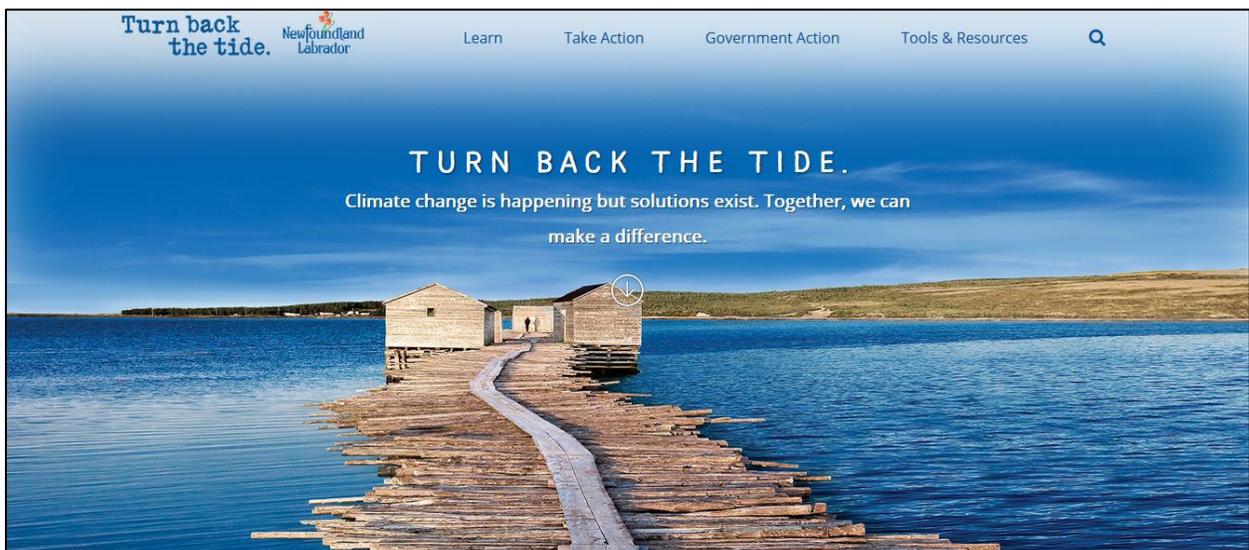
Movement-Based Marketing

Develop social marketing material and resources that can be adapted and used by municipalities, organizations, and community groups to engage their constituents and members. (See <http://climateaction.ca/campaign/> for example.)

9

Information Portal

Develop a one-stop information portal to provide the public with information on climate solutions, incentives, and resources to help them take action. (See [Turn Back the Tide](#), from Newfoundland and Labrador).



Screen Capture: www.turnbackthetide.ca

10

Municipal Plans

Incorporate community engagement and into municipal climate plans, in particular Local Action Plans under Milestone 3 of the Partners for Climate Protection (see the guidelines from the [Federation of Canadian Municipalities](#) and [Transform TO](#) for the Toronto plan)

11

Volunteer

Encourage government staff to volunteer with local groups. Not only can they provide expertise, it will also help to bridge the gap between communities and government.

BOTTOM UP

How communities can organize and lead in the transition to a better future.

ORGANIZING

1

A Green Group

Start a neighbourhood green group, or a green committee of an existing group. It starts with a few key sparks, volunteers, and community spirit. Your focus, and your activities, will depend on the interests and skills of your members, so take time to see what others have done and think about the possibilities. (See <http://climateaction.ca/green-groups>, www.green13toronto.org, www.gn21.org)

2

A Social Venture

If you have a specific project or product in mind, consider starting a social venture to combine mission with business. (see [Futurpreneur Canada's guide](#) or the [Canada Business Network](#))

3

A Contact List

Start by canvassing the community to see who is interested in: a) being informed of upcoming events, b) volunteering on community projects, or c) leading or helping organize projects. Collect e-mail addresses and/or phone numbers and create a newsletter.

4

A Community Network

If there isn't one already, create a contact list or a network of community groups that would be interested in collaborating in support of common goals. Other groups in the community will be your strongest allies! (See <http://climateaction.ca/planning>)

5

A Community Scan or Map

An early step is to prepare a community scan – an overview of who is doing what in the community. This will help you in coming up with ideas about how to connect climate action with the needs of the community, and where there are opportunities to partner with other groups. Print it out as a report, or if you are ambitious, produce a community green map! (See <http://climateaction.ca/planning>)

6

A Community Action Plan

A scan can lead to a plan. Put all the great project ideas from across your network into a community action plan, or highlight the projects that your group wants to take on. This is a great way to promote community-led solutions and to raise funds and support for your projects. It's also a great way to show potential funders that you have a vision and the capacity to deliver solutions. (See <http://climateaction.ca/planning>)

COMMUNITY AWARENESS

7

Information Tables

The simplest way to get started is to have an information table at local events and community meetings. Have sign-up sheets handy, an information sheet on your organization, relevant brochures, and information on climate action and other green activities.

8

Newsletter and Social Media

A simple monthly or quarterly newsletter will keep members informed of upcoming events and opportunities to participate in community meetings and public consultations. (See www.mailchimp.com) You can start a Facebook page, or create a simple website with a calendar of events (See www.green13toronto.org)

9

Community Walks

Host a community walk to talk about opportunities for neighbourhood projects. Earth Hour in March and Jane's Walk in May are two opportunities to be part of an international movement of community-led walks. (See www.earthhour.org, and www.janeswalk.org)

10

Parties

Hosting a street party, porch party, community pot luck, or a park party is a great way to introduce your group to the community and to build community spirit. A street party can be an intimate backstreet affair, or you can partner with other groups to host a mainstreet party. (See www.carfreevancouver.org or <http://parkdalevillagebia.com/tag/spring-into-parkdale/>, <https://earthday.ca/programs/earthplay/>)

11

Movie Nights

Movie nights (with popcorn) combine a social event with education. They can be held in local theatres, libraries, or in a local park on summer evenings. (see <http://planetinfoocus.org>)

12

Speakers

Have guest speakers come to your meetings, or provide speakers for community groups and schools. (See the Climate Leaders speakers list at www.climatereality.ca)

13

Home Tours – Doors Open

Who has the greenest homes and buildings in your community – the lowest energy bill, the best renewables, the best garden or the greenest yard? The best way to demonstrate green solutions is on site, whether it is a home, a school, or other building or greenspace. (See <http://greenenergydoorsopen.ca/>)

14

Eco Fair

Host a community fair to showcase the organizations and companies that can help people take action. A community fair can be held in a community hall or school as an afternoon or

evening event, or it can be a larger festival with activities and presentations as well as displays. (See <https://ecofairtoronto.org/>)

CONSULTATION AND ADVOCACY

15

Consultation

Organize and participate in community consultations on climate action and green plans, urban planning, infrastructure projects, and budgets. How can we empower our governments to show leadership, and how will their leadership further support a green community?

16

Advocacy

Petitions (either online or the traditional pages of signatures), deputations, and meetings with your government representatives all help strengthen support for climate action and green neighbourhoods through government budgets, programs, and decisions.

17

Affiliation

Joining a local network, or even the Climate Action Network helps empower groups to speak on your behalf or join forces with other groups to press for stronger action. (See <http://climateactionnetwork.ca/>)

COMMUNITY PLANNING

18

An Extreme Weather Plan

How would your community cope in an extreme weather emergency or blackout? Are we prepared in our own homes? Are there vulnerable people who will need help? Are there buildings with backup power and emergency shelters? Host workshops to help people be ready for extreme weather, or enlist emergency volunteers to help those in need. (See www.crewtoronto.ca and www.clarionhub.ca)

19

A Community Green Plan

What opportunities are there to bring nature into your community? Look at streetscapes, planters, schoolyard greening, de-paving, alleyways (See [Evergreen's green guides](#), www.harbordvillage.com/projects/greening and www.parkpeople.ca)

20

A Community Energy Plan

Many municipalities are drafting community energy plans to look at ways to promote conservation and renewable or low-carbon energy sources for their jurisdiction. Community groups are beginning to play a more active role in these plans, both on the consultation side and in developing community energy projects. (See www.questcanada.org/ and <http://gettingtoimplementation.ca>)

21

A Complete Community

“Complete communities” is a planning term to refer to compact community with a full range of housing, jobs, amenities, essential services, and infrastructure. They are resource-efficient, yet offer a high quality of life. Community workshops, a community vision and development priorities can help provide direction and support for municipal planning and development. (See <http://smartgrowthontario.ca/our-focus/complete-communities/>)

GOING DEEPER – SUPPORTING CLIMATE ACTION

22

Green Ambassadors

Work with local governments and companies to train volunteers as green ambassadors. The idea of environmental ambassadors started with the Toronto Chinese Environmental Committee in the 1980s, and they were able to adapt the training to fit current priorities and funding. Green ambassadors would be trained in climate solutions, available incentives and support programs, and could help reach the community at large as well as special audiences. (See [Live Green Toronto Volunteers](#) for a city run program.)

23

Individual Climate Plan

Produce a climate challenge card and action plan for individuals. Include a range of activities related to energy conservation, renewable power, transportation alternatives, local food, and community. The card can be adapted and tailored to different audiences, and it can be used by community ambassadors or in presentations to schools and community groups. (See sample at <http://climateaction.ca/action-home/>)

24

Climate Leaders – local business

A climate leaders campaign in partnership with your local business association can help promote climate solutions as well as the businesses that offer climate friendly products and services. Window signs identify participating businesses, and each store can display its own action plan. (See <http://climateaction.ca/action-home/> for details and templates)

25

A Community Carbon Challenge

Join forces with other community groups, political representatives, and businesses to run a community-wide carbon challenge. This can be run as a friendly challenge among neighbours, or between neighbourhoods (See www.projectneutral.org/ for a campaign using a carbon calculator to measure result.)

26

Extreme Weather Volunteers

Organize and train volunteers who will check on people who may need special assistance during blackouts or other extreme weather emergencies. In particular, look at high rise buildings with seniors or special needs who might need assistance in extreme temperatures.

27

Home Energy Tune-up or Audit

Offer a quick energy tune-up to homes and apartments with short inspection of energy bills and possible ways to save energy. For a more detailed home energy audit, work with a certified auditor. Check with your municipality and province for audit and energy conservation subsidies and incentives. (See <http://savehomeenergy.ca>)

EVEN DEEPER – SPECIFIC SOLUTIONS

Community climate solutions focus on carbon reduction and social benefit. They are solutions that can help people save money, eat better, be healthier, enjoy life, and build a stronger community at the same time as they lower our carbon emissions and build the foundation for a low-carbon economy and society. In particular, these projects will focus on energy conservation at home, green power, active transportation, local food, and/or local green jobs.

28

Solar Roofs

Organize a solar demonstration or a group purchase of solar panels. Start with an introductory community meeting to introduce the available options, tour existing installations, and host a meeting for potential buyers to select a preferred option.

29

Community Geothermal

Similar to the solar roofs project, but with a focus on pooling community investment in a geothermal project.

30

Safe Cycling

Are there safe routes to school and a complete network of bike lanes in your community? Hold community meetings to plan for bike lanes, work with local bike stores to promote bike maintenance and repair, and hold bike rodeos at schools to promote safe cycling habits. (See www.saferoutestoschool.ca/ for school programs.)

31

BikeShare

Start a bicycle co-op or bike share program to make bikes available around the community and train people in bike maintenance and repair.

32

Tool Library

Start a tool library where people can take out an annual membership and borrow tools for their own projects.

33

Reskilling

Organize workshops and courses to bring back lost arts and skills, such as woodworking, quilting, and survival skills. (See <https://transitionnetwork.org>)

34

Green Thumbs and Seed Exchanges

Are there gardeners in your community who are willing to lend their expertise to others? Start a green thumbs advisory service or host a Seedy Saturday event in the spring to sell seeds and seedlings. (See the [Master Gardeners of Ontario](#) and [Seeds of Diversity](#))

35

Community Gardens

Is there a plot of vacant land, or part of a park that can be turned into a community garden, container garden, or bee garden? (See [this guide](#) on community gardens from the BC Climate Action Toolkit, resources on container, balcony and rooftop gardens from the [Toronto Urban Growers](#), and the David Suzuki Foundation's page on [bee gardens](#))

36

Sharecropping Backyards

Not everyone with a backyard has a green thumb or the time for gardening. So why not organize backyard sharecropping, where owners will offer their backyard to someone who wants to garden and they share the produce. (See <http://cultivatetoronto.com/>)

37

De-Paving

Naturalize an asphalt playground or other paved over areas. Organize a de-paving party and reclaim some nature. (See <http://www.depaveparadise.ca/>)

38

Innovation Centres

Set up a shared office space for groups and social ventures in your community. Share the administration costs and create a space for community meetings and collaboration. (See <https://socialinnovation.org/>)

Community Funding

39

Community Fund

Start your own community fund to support all the great projects that are happening across your community. Work with an existing organization or community foundation, or run a crowd-sourcing campaign. (See <http://communityfoundations.ca/> or <https://smallchange.org/>)

IN-BETWEEN

There are all types of organizations, companies, institutions, and agencies that can show leadership in climate action and support community action.

1

Climate Leadership

Demonstrate leadership through internal actions, the products or services you offer, your support for community, as a trailblazer, and/or in going carbon neutral. Publicize and promote your commitment. (See <http://climateaction.ca/campaign/>)

2

Community Support

Help others, whether it be in your neighbourhood or your community of peers or business association. Share your successes with others.

3

Climate Funds

Provide funding for community action on climate change. Larger companies and foundations can develop their own funds and branding; smaller companies can contribute to existing funds. (See <http://communityfoundations.ca/> or <https://www.smallchangefund.org/>)

4

Campaigns and Programs

Develop solutions-based campaigns and programs to help promote a low-carbon lifestyle and climate solutions such as alternative transportation, energy conservation, renewable power, local and healthy food, greenspace and nature, or healthy communities.

5

Be Creative

Connect art, culture, and education – the power of our minds – with a low-carbon future. Connect sports, recreation, and good food – the power of our bodies – with a low carbon lifestyle. (See www.capefarewell.com/)

6

Volunteer

Encourage your staff to volunteer with community groups, either to help organize activities, run an organization, or help out on projects. (See <https://volunteer.ca/sdg> or local volunteer centres.) For post secondary institutions, students in all fields can gain practical experience by helping community groups develop and carry out projects.

7

Collaborate

The challenges we face are bigger than any one of us can address alone. We need climate action alliances in the major cities, provincially, and nationally, that can mobilize resources to empower action across the country. (see <http://www.civicaction.ca/>)

A SIMPLE PLAN

Climate change can seem overwhelming. So too can community engagement, whether you are designing a government plan or organizing in your own neighbourhood. The best advice I can offer is to start with your strengths, keep it simple, and allow things to evolve and grow organically.

At the community level, start with a Green Neighbours group. Find out where people's interests and energy lie, and design your activities about ideas that can be done and that best fit the needs of your community. Build from there.

At the government level, there are four key activities that can form the backbone of a community engagement strategy:

1. Incentives and Investments

Offer a full range of incentives for energy conservation, green power, active and alternative transportation, and healthy and local food.

2. Community Action Plans

Provide small grants to support the creation of a community network, community scan, and a low-cost action plan to highlight community priorities and projects, and show the opportunities for co-benefits with climate action.

3. Community Projects

Streamline applications and reporting for pre-approved community projects for climate outreach and support. Create funding partnerships with other funds to acknowledge and encourage co-benefits.

4. Movement Marketing

Design campaigns that can be widely adapted by groups to fit the needs of their members or community.

For all other organizations, funders, and companies, look at where you can best add value to the above four points. There is plenty of room for new and innovative funds, support programs, and campaigns.

STAY TUNED

Here's a few ideas for how to stay plugged in.

Climate Action Canada

<http://climateaction.ca>

Information and ideas on community engagement and campaigns.

Climate Action Network

<http://climateactionnetwork.ca>

Canada's network of organizations working on climate change.

Climate Reality – Climate Hubs

<http://climatehub.strikingly.com/>

A new initiative to support climate action in communities across Canada through information sharing and local climate hubs.

Drawdown

<http://www.drawdown.org/>

The latest initiative from Paul Hawken and friends, focusing on 100 transformative ideas, many of which have community applications.