

SOUTHSTRONG **CITIES**

PEOPLE FIRST. EQUITY CENTERED

GREEN BUILDING INITIATIVES

SouthStrong Cities Grab-N-Go Policies

Green Building Initiatives

JUNE 2021

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What's the issue?

Climate change is a critical and real threat that merits both national and global focus. Closer to home, the topic should be a major priority in Southern states with their particular vulnerabilities to climate impacts such as extreme weather events, sea-level rise and increasing temperatures.

In 2020, many Southern states and their citizens not only faced pandemic hardships but also suffered devastating challenges due to natural disasters. As an increasing number of states and cities launch initiatives to better prepare for climate impacts, there is an opportunity to take up parallel work to address the root cause of these problems – carbon footprint. Green Building initiatives can encourage local-level action that supports and expands broader climate change goals and strategies."

The data below is published by the SEAP: [*State & Local Climate Policy Report*](#)

“ Southern states experienced more than 120 tornadoes on Easter Sunday April 12 and April 13, 2020. ”

Why does it matter?

Local action from cities to incentivize and facilitate shifts to green energy can intersect with a range of community-level goals.

- A movement towards a more diverse energy portfolio works to mitigate the pace of climate change.
- Local investments in green energy can seed demand for and job growth in these industries. Through incentives and direct participation, cities' investments can lay the groundwork for growth in green building activity and lead to new skill development in the community's workforce.

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Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

1. Changes to local building codes.

These are the legal rules that govern how buildings are built, redeveloped and renovated. These codes can provide incentives for projects that use green technologies to decrease (or offset) the cost of these technologies for owners and developers, resulting in faster/wider adoption.

Change local building codes to include incentives that work to increase the use of energy-efficient techniques and materials.

- This EPA [website](#) outlines several model codes for both residential and other construction.

Once available, pursue energy conservation by advocating for state and local adoption of the 2021 International Energy Conservation Code.

- [Summary](#) of expected 2021 IECC changes.
- [Current 2018 IECC](#) and schedule for final 2021 IECC.

Implement a local program to encourage and increase the use of solar power or other renewables.

- [SolSmart](#) is a designation and technical assistance program funded by the Dept. of Energy to help local governments reduce barriers to adopting solar energy programs. SolSmart has been implemented by over 300 cities and counties since 2015. Participants begin via “bronze” level achievements and pursue additional “silver” and “gold” levels through more robust actions.

Promote or require buildings’ electricity use as a primary heating source (versus propane, wood, or gas).

- This Southwest Energy Efficiency Project [report](#) discusses the emerging trend towards building electrification, the role of cities and counties in implementation and 12 examples of communities in California and Massachusetts with electrification codes.
- This S&P Global mid-2020 [article](#) describes electrification policy efforts at cities on the east and west coasts. It highlights the legal challenges that make incentives less problematic than an outright ban.

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2. Changes to cities' Code review processes.

Because cities provide legal review and approval for building projects, cities' control over how (and how fast) projects are assessed can itself become an incentive. By offering expedited or simplified review procedures for some green building features, cities can encourage expanded or accelerated adoption of these practices.

The SolSmart program includes a program guide and toolkit for local governments to use to assist efforts to simplify solar permitting and options for expedited review for some types of permits.

- [How Streamlined Permits Can Help Your Community Go Solar](#)

Request funds or staff to conduct or facilitate energy audits for residential construction projects.

- Energy audits can identify opportunities for efficiency/conservation measures, encourage the transition to all-electric buildings, and scope potential solar installations. Some utilities provide energy audits, but cities could also provide this service or connect project applicants to other resources. Elizabeth City, NC, offers free energy [audits](#) for its utility customers.
- Focusing on residential projects, there is a wide range of policy options for local governments to consider. These include expedited permit reviews, density bonuses, and discounted fees. This EPA [overview](#) reviews some incentives suggested for Energy Star qualified homes (which cities could identify and credential via energy audits).

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3. Changes to city's own operational energy practices.

Through their operations and facilities, cities are themselves consumers of energy. Cities can adopt green energy commitments in operational areas such as electricity usage for buildings and utilities. Cities can also identify energy goals for fleet vehicle purchases.

Adopt a policy for some/all city electricity purchases to be from carbon-neutral green/renewable sources.

Most electric providers offer purchase plans to allow customers (including cities) to purchase some or all of their electricity from renewable sources, usually at a premium rate. Cities can authorize this additional expenditure as part of a policy initiative to support community climate action and energy efficiency goals.

- This Pioneer Valley Sustainability [website](#) provides an overview of municipal purchases of renewable energy and links to example cities and resources.

Within this approach, it is worth noting that city utilities often represent a significant portion of the organization's electric usage. To address potential ratepayer issues, cities can authorize the use of General Funds to support the incremental cost of the city utility's purchase of more expensive electricity from renewable sources.

Cities can also seek to participate in "off-site power purchase agreements (PPAs)." This mechanism allows local governments to purchase energy from large-scale renewable energy projects. This World Resources Institute [website](#) provides an overview.

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Cont. 3. Changes to city's own operational energy practices.

Adopt requirements for City facilities and projects to maximize energy efficiency and reduce total energy demand whenever feasible.

Cities with local green building incentives should emphasize these tools by adopting policy commitments - for example, via ordinance or resolution - to mandate the City's own participation in available incentives or programs (in most cases, green building incentives are voluntary).

Louisville, KY's [website](#) provides a listing of the renewable energy initiatives underway in the city, including the city's commitments related to its own energy purchases and operations.

Set goals for electric fleet purchases.

This Electrify The South [website](#) provides a toolkit for establishing goals for municipal fleet electric vehicles and examples of how several cities have approached planning to expand electric vehicle fleet.

Adopt a "no idle" policy for City vehicles.

Local ordinances to implement this policy help to reduce emissions and also expand awareness of this issue.

- This "How Green Is My Town?" [website](#) provides sample language and identifies cities and resources for other examples.
- This 2006 EPA [listing](#) provides examples of anti-idling regulations from cities in several states, including Georgia, South Carolina and Virginia.

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4. Incorporate green building and renewable energy for cities' own capital projects.

Through capital projects, cities themselves are builders. When city facilities are built or remodeled, these projects can utilize the same green building incentives available to other projects. Additionally, city projects can establish a higher goal for green building features as part of discretionary project planning. Leading by example, public projects can provide important demonstrations of economic payback from green building and can integrate public access to green infrastructure (for example, electric car charging stations).

Adopt a policy that City projects will utilize green building incentives to the greatest degree feasible.

Once a green building program is adopted, it may be structured to provide voluntary incentives. Cities should adopt a policy – via ordinance or resolution – to require that the city's own capital projects pursue participation to the extent feasible.

- The [City of Gaithersburg, MD](#), requires green building standards for its municipal facilities.
- This US Green Building Council [website](#) provides a listing of state and local green building policies. It can locate examples of local codes that stipulate that public projects of a certain scale are required to achieve LEED certification.

Pursue creation of a City-sponsored community solar project.

A community solar project allows customers who cannot install their own solar system to participate in a larger, off-site shared project.

- This NREL [website](#) describes this approach, lists over 1,200 projects in 43 states, and provides various resources.

Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

5. Use City communication channels to provide community education and outreach.

Cities possess extensive communication networks. Using these channels to provide education and outreach about green energy goals, incentives, and achievements helps to promote community-wide interest, understanding, and adoption of these technologies.

Develop consumer-friendly materials to publicize and explain Code incentives.

- This City [webpage](#) for Coral Gables, FL, provides an overview of the City's green building ordinance. This program is identified on the City website alongside the City's numerous other sustainability initiatives.
- This sustainability [dashboard](#) for Richmond, VA, covers several initiatives.

Develop local workshops for building trades to explain green building changes, provide technical assistance, encourage adoption and credentialing.

- This Ft. Collins, CO [website](#) provides a range of resources for builders and property owners, including materials from city-sponsored lectures.

Raise awareness about existing rebate and assistance programs from local energy providers, focusing on outreach to underserved communities.

- [Gastonia, NC](#) provides rebates to residents for energy efficiency improvements.

Promote and utilize carbon footprint calculators and other tools to expand community awareness.

- CoolClimate [calculator](#)
- Energy Star [program](#)
- LEED [program](#) for cities and communities