

San Diego climate plan moves to full council

Mayor Kevin Faulconer, standing at the lectern, discusses San Diego city's draft Climate Action Plan during a conference in 2014. / photo by Alejandro Tamayo * U-T

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As international climate-change talks kicked off in Paris on Monday, a key committee in San Diego pushed ahead with a blueprint for cutting greenhouse-gas emissions and powering the city using only green energy within two decades.

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Members of the City Council's environment committee unanimously approved the proposed Climate Action Plan, which was first drafted nearly two years ago.

The document is now scheduled for review by the full council on Dec. 15, where it's expected to garner strong support. Mayor Kevin Faulconer and other elected officials, along with a range of business and community advocacy groups, have voiced their backing as well.

"While world leaders get together to think globally, we here in San Diego are collectively taking action locally," said Councilman Todd Gloria, who stewarded creation of the plan while he was interim mayor in 2013.

San Diego is on the verge of committing to 100 percent renewable energy by 2035. That goal exceeds the state mandate, which calls for green energy to account for 50 percent of all power usage in California by 2030.

Similar efforts to go all-renewable have been launched in San Francisco, San Jose and Las Vegas. Burlington, Vt., and Aspen, Colo., claim that they already run a 100 percent renewable-energy grid.

In San Diego County, more than a dozen cities are considering or have adopted climate-change plans, which are often rolled into updates of their long-range general plans. This happens because the updates must meet newer, more stringent state standards on greenhouse-gas emissions.

San Diego's Climate Action Plan calls for exploring a program called community choice aggregation, or CCA, as a way to help the city meet its aim of 100 percent renewable energy usage. Under the program, a

nonprofit board of elected officials, supported by a staff of energy experts, would determine where the city gets its electricity.

Currently, San Diego Gas & Electric buys and sells all power to the city. The investor-owned utility has recently taken steps that would allow its parent company, Sempra Energy, to lobby against community choice aggregation.

During the environment committee's meeting Monday, Councilwoman Marti Emerald proposed fast-tracking of the community-choice proposal. The full council will have to consider whether to adopt a schedule that could lead to a final decision on the program by as early as April.

After the meeting, the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce released a statement criticizing what it saw as a hasty timeline.

"Rushing into multibillion-dollar decisions, without time to fully study the impacts, places San Diego residents and businesses at risk of overpaying for unknown climate benefits," Jerry Sanders, the group's president, said in the statement.

Nicole Capretz, executive director of the nonprofit advocacy group Climate Action Campaign, praised the committee's actions.

"We are modeling success that can be replicated in every city around the world," she said. "Now, it's all about implementation. We are calling on the mayor and the council to develop a detailed implementation plan with full funding."

Falconer emphasized collective support for the overall blueprint; backers include the chamber of commerce, the Building Industry Association, the Downtown San Diego Partnership and various environmental organizations.

"The bipartisan support shown in today's committee vote, combined with the support from local business and environmental groups, underscores that leaving a better San Diego to our children is something we can all get behind," Falconer said.

While the plan is widely embraced, concerns about the expense of making the plan a reality loom. Also, some grassroots activists voiced frustration Monday that the document doesn't give enough priority to low-income neighborhoods that have long suffered from poor air quality.

"We have to include equity and funding for implementation in this climate plan," said Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition. "The [plan] fails to identify where the money's coming from, how it's moving forward. That funding strategy is critically important."

The city intends to form a working group that would report to the environment committee on how to put the plan into action, said Councilman David Alvarez, who chairs the committee.

San Diego's climate plan comes on the heels of two cases where municipal agencies were sued after drafting documents that didn't explicitly address state mandates for lowering levels of greenhouse gasses.

The county of San Diego is being forced to redo its climate plan after the Fourth District Court of Appeal rejected its document. The San Diego Association of Governments awaits a state Supreme Court ruling on its hotly debated Regional Transportation Plan.

State requirements call for cutting greenhouse-gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, then 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030 and 80 percent by 2050.

It's still unclear how San Diego's methodology, which uses 2010 emission levels as a baseline for reductions, would square with the state's.

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