

Context

We have ten years to drastically reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in order to reduce the risk of catastrophic climate events (IPCC, 2018). In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identified that the global target for climate change mitigation must be a limit of 1.5 °C warming, and that this target will require a significant reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (IPCC, 2018, p. vi). The IPCC notes that while this target “is possible within the laws of chemistry and physics,” meeting it will “require unprecedented transitions in all aspects of society” (IPCC, 2018, p. v).

Climate change requires a coordinated response from all levels of government (Bednar, Raikes, & McBean, 2018, p. 44). There is a critical disconnect between the urgency of climate change as established by the IPCC and the limited climate action being taken at the local government level. Within British Columbia (BC), local communities have a crucial role in climate change mitigation and adaptation as they often have direct authority over key sources of emissions (Dale et al., 2019, p. 2). Given the global trend of local governments declaring climate emergencies, it is clear that they are beginning to respond to projected climate change impacts (Ellsmoor, 2019). Their role in actively reducing the causes of climate change and associated risks is much less straightforward, especially considering contested environmental regulation jurisdiction (Stacey, 2015, p. 47; McElroy, 2019).

Objectives

This research will investigate the changing role of local government planners in BC with regard to climate change mitigation in light of the IPCC’s ten-year time horizon and to determine what policy tools are available to planners. Specifically, my research will explore the policy implications of declaring a climate emergency at the local government level, and what that means for planners in various positions within the local government.

Theoretical Framework

Transformational incrementalism (TI) describes “the social processes underlying planning initiatives to achieve transformative change” (Buchan, Cloutier, & Friedman, 2019). TI focuses on incremental transformational change and the shifting role of the civil servant towards being change agents from within the government. This research seeks to apply those theories onto planners’ role in implementing climate action.

Methods and procedures

This research will analyse and compare the role of planners in law, practice, and theory. The legal analysis will include reviewing legal papers, the Local Government Act and other relevant legislation, as well as interviewing practicing lawyers. This will be crucial in grounding the research in legal feasibility. The practical component will include 10-15 semi-structured interviews with local government planners and politicians from municipalities and regional districts across BC engaged in implementing environmental regulations in practice. I have made initial connections with many of the potential interviewees though networking at the EcoCity World Summit in October 2019. Once appropriate ethics approval has been attained, I will follow up with these individuals to participate in my study. I will analyze the relationship between cities’ climate emergency declarations and their plans as a key arena of the implementation of climate change mitigation policy. This will include analyzing the plans for their urgency, level of detail, and feasibility given the legal analysis, and the local governments’ other governing documents such as Official Community Plans and Regional Growth Strategies. The component will also include a comparative analysis between local governments’ of similar and differing sizes, as this will likely have a significant impact on their scope.

Significance

This research focuses on compiling and assessing the most effective measures that local governments can use to help limit global warming to 1.5°C by 2030. Ultimately, this research strives to provide a practical and timely tool for the planning profession as it begins to take a more proactive role in mitigating climate change.

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