9 JULY 2021 / CLIMATE HAVENS

[THEME]

SEAN RAMESWRAM (host): Summer started just a few weeks ago but we’re already breaking heat records and melting all over North America.   
  
People are dying in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia.   
  
Texas is facing yet another energy crisis.

New York City is sending push notifications telling people to conserve energy to avoid a blackout.

This is our climate crisis future. And we are just getting started.

In the next fifty years, climate change is going to force tens of tens of millions of people to move.

Late last year we asked Amanda Shendruk at Quartz where all those people will *go.*

SCORING IN - A CLEAR VISION OF THE FUTURE

AMANDA: Researchers right now are saying that climate change is probably going to lead to one of the largest mass migrations in human history. So there's a World Bank study that projects 143 million people will be displaced within their own countries by climate change in about the next three decades. And most of those people will end up in cities.

SEAN:I mean, thinking about what we're seeing in North America right now, it feels like there is increasingly nowhere to go without dealing with some aspect of extreme climate. What are people looking for when they leave one place for another?

AMANDA: Yeah, it's true that there's not really going to be anywhere that is completely untouched by climate change. However, what we've sort of explored in this big project that we did at Quartz is the idea of something called a climate haven. So a climate haven--

SEAN: A climate haven.

AMANDA: Sorry, I didn't mean to ... talk over you.

SEAN: No, I talked over you. It's all good.

AMANDA: I can just do that again if you want. I'll just stop so you can say climate haven.  
  
SEAN: [laughs]   
  
AMANDA: [laughs]  
  
SEAN: Perfect. A climate haven?

AMANDA:Yeah. A climate haven. So this is a city that's more or less protected from the extreme effects of climate change. So somewhere that's geographically located in an area that the temperature is moderate, so it's not going to get crazy cold or crazy hot. A place with abundant access to water and agricultural land. A city with the space and opportunity to expand its infrastructure. And the hope in talking about these cities as a haven is that residents from vulnerable places might choose proactively to move to places like this instead of waiting for a disaster to destroy their homes or to be forced out by rising insurance or some future government mandate.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: What kind of policy choices are these kinds of climate havens or receiver cities going to have to make to receive all these people and maintain some sort of functional infrastructure?

AMANDA: There are really three ways that cities need to prepare, and that's economically, socially and physically. So I'll just break that down. Physically, we're talking about does the city have the space and the infrastructure to accommodate a mass of new people. For example, in places like Mexico City and Dhaka, when there are so many people moving in so quickly, it creates something called runaway urbanization, which is just the result of a lot of people coming in and the city not really being able to keep up and the infrastructure not being able to keep up.

*<CLIP> PBS REPORTER: Everywhere, you can see the damage wrought by this frenzied growth. By one rough estimate, traffic alone cost the city 2 billion dollars a year.*

*<CLIP> GEOGRAPHER ONLINE NARRATOR: The challenge of delivering water, electricity and telephone lines to a seemingly endless boundary is not easy.*

*<CLIP> PBS REPORTER: Raw sewage flows into lakes and rivers so polluted they’re beyond treatment.*

AMANDA: Cities need to prepare economically. So for most places, it's going to require significant investment to make a lot of the changes that are necessary to become a receiver city and to do them in an equitable and a sustainable way. So where's that money going to come from? What kind of economy can sustain the newcomers? You know, they're going to need jobs. And then finally, a city needs to prepare socially. How does a community think about accommodating newcomers who are diverse in terms of race and culture and income?

SEAN: Yeah.

AMANDA:It's a difficult question. It's kind of an eternal question. And I think it's going to rely on individual solutions From every city and every community.

SEAN: Is there a city in America that you feel serves as a model as a climate haven or a receiver city right now?

AMANDA:Unfortunately, no, there isn't really a great model for this right now. Some cities are starting to think about it.

*<CLIP> CITY OF ANN ARBOR YOUTUBE PROMOTIONAL VIDEO: Like all cities, Ann Arbor is experiencing impacts to the environment due to climate change.*

AMANDA: So Ann Arbor, for example, recently got a grant to start thinking about this, and they're starting with an overhaul of its water treatment system.

*<CLIP> CNBC REPORTER: At a small church meeting house in a small Louisiana farm town, a small community is making a very big decision.*

AMANDA: And Louisiana has recently completed a really exhaustive research project on climate relocation.

*<CLIP> CNBC REPORTER: The state of LA is using federal funds to purchase new land, build new homes, demolish the old flood-damaged homes, and turn this area into wetlands.*

AMANDA: My colleague Tim McDonald did a really great piece on this in identifying the problems that receiver communities in Louisiana are going through.

[*<CLIP>*](https://archive.org/details/WJLA_20120724_110000_ABC_News_Good_Morning_America/start/5820/end/5880) *ANNOUNCER: And now please welcome our mayor, the 62nd mayor of the city of Buffalo, Mayor Byron W Brown...*

SCORING IN - THE REASONS WHY

AMANDA: The mayor of Buffalo last year actually declared the city a climate refuge city,

*< CLIP> BUFFALO MAYOR BYRON BROWN: In Buffalo we have tremendous opportunity as our planet changes. Based on scientific research, we know that Buffalo will be a climate refuge city for centuries to come.*

AMANDA: But it's mostly been talk. There hasn't really been anything happening to make that a reality.

*< CLIP> BUFFALO MAYOR BYRON BROWN: Our power purchase agreement will bring renewable energy, positive environmental change and a creative approach to a sustainable future.*

AMANDA: And that's the case really across a lot of the U.S. There's very little that's been done. So at Quartz, we created this project called Greenhaven, where we decided to look at the question of where people will go when the waters rise. And the main objective of our project really was to explore what cities need to be thinking about right now and to show that really thinking about or talking about installing solar panels and sea walls just -- it's not enough. The preparation really needs to be deeper.If we're going to think practically about the future of people forced out of their communities by the disastrous effects of climate change, it's going to require a total rethink of cities.   
  
SEAN: So what did you do?.   
  
AMANDA: So one day I asked my editor. Could I just make up a city? And they let me. So I made up a city and I called it Leeside*.*

SCORING OUT.

SEAN: After the break we go to Leeside.

[MIDROLL]

SEAN: Okay, Amanda. Before the break you made the argument that there aren’t really cities in the United States taking this seriously enough so you made one up. And now, if you don’t mind, I’d like you to take us to this fictional place you made up, so we can better understand the steps cities could take here to better prepare themselves.

*NARRATOR: The Year is 2020.*

*JORDAN ENSO (“newly elected mayor of Leeside”): Leeside.*

*SCORING <Breather>*

AMANDA: So we have a new mayor in Leeside now, Jordan Enso… just elected.

*JORDAN ENSO: When I moved here after Hurricane Maria, I found a beautiful city with a long history. But I also found a city that was forever looking backwards.*

AMANDA: Leeside is a Rust Belt city and that was done very intentionally. Rust Belt cities kind of had their manufacturing heyday in the 20th century, and they really saw a boom in terms of population and infrastructure and jobs,but then the industry started to go overseas and the jobs and the populations really dried up. So now you've got a bunch of cities in the Rust Belt. So we're talking about, you know, Detroit, Duluth, Buffalo, Rochester, places like that.

*JORDAN ENSO: As your new mayor, I promise you: We are going to start looking forwards.*

AMANDA: Leeside, who have small populations, but an infrastructure that can support a much larger population.

*SFX: APPLAUSE*

*JORDAN ENSO: It’s time to make Leeside into a climate haven other cities can only aspire to.  
  
SFX: APPLAUSE*

AMANDA: The location is also good geographically because you're right along the Great Lakes. So great access to fresh water. The climates' already fairly moderate.

*JORDAN ENSO: Our city is out of the path of hurricanes and wildfires.*

AMANDA: You're not along the ocean, so you don't have to worry about sea level rise. The cities in that region aren't likely to be as affected as many places.

*JORDAN ENSO: So now... let’s bring back the people!’*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Okay, sounds good so far, but what’s the mayor gonna do about all the rust?

*NARRATOR: The Year is 2025.*

*[NEWS REPORT THEME]*

*NEWS REPORTER JOAN: Leeside wants to be the city of the Future. But will anybody show up?*

*NEWS REPORTER KATHY: That IS the question everyone’s asking, Joan. But the mayor is doing a LOT to attract new residents.*

*<CLIP> ANCHOR WILL:The city is redeveloping old industrial lots into housing and greenspace…*

*<CLIP> ANCHOR SCHUYLER: They’re giving out free wifi and setting up solar panel sites.*

*<CLIP> ANCHOR EFIM: Leeside! The city that’s banning cars in the city center to make it more pleasant for bikers and pedestrians…*

SCORING OUT

AMANDA:So if you look at satellite images of Detroit or Rochester or something, they have tons and tons of empty lots. And there's also a lot of abandoned buildings and houses. So Leeside took and turned a lot of empty lots and abandoned houses into affordable housing.   
  
SEAN: And once things are looking less rusty you gotta do something about the economy that packed up and left?

AMANDA: Yeah, it's a big question. So I guess the first thing the city does is increase its tax base. They entice a group of people that we called climate pioneers to the city. These are people with the means to relocate for opportunities. Those who can take advantage of sort of a post-pandemic office exodus. They do things like establish local businesses. The city relaxes zoning laws so that they can find creative uses for the city's abandoned buildings. One thing that the city established was a fellowship program.

*<CLIP> ANCHOR BYRD: How would you like to study renewable engineering? How about urban agriculture? Today, the city of Leeside announced that it's partnering with its university to help people train for green careers.*

*<CLIP> ANCHOR CECILIA: It’s all part of the city’s push to bring in workers--and jobs.*

*<AD JINGLE> Our city. Your Tomorrow. Move to Leeside… Today.*

*CHEESY SCORING OUT*

*NARRATOR: The Year is 2027.*

*WALDO ARIAS (Youtuber): Recording… alright. Hey guys, Waldo here. This is going to be kind of a weird video because… we’re moving? I mean… it is crazy. My mom, she like saved for this house so long. And when we bought this house ten years ago, when I was a little kid, she was so proud. And I mean, even then, people told her it was dumb to buy a place in Miami. But also like… they kept building houses here, you know? And selling them? So my mom put all her savings into this house that is now basically worthless. Because no one is going to buy a place that’s going to be like… literally going underwater.*

*So we’re moving to Leeside. You know, like the ads. <singing> Our city! Your Tomorrow! I don’t know. I’ll miss it here.*

*NARRATOR: The Year is 2031.*

*[NEWS REPORT THEME]*

*<CLIP> JOAN: It seems Leeside’s population just keeps growing, Kathy.*

*<CLIP> KATHY: That’s right, Joan, it’s basically exploded, adding 20,000 people in just a few years time!*

*<CLIP> JOAN: And so many are clustering around Fiddler’s Green...*

*BRIDGET WALKER: Ever since this city started this haven business, normal people can’t live in our neighborhood anymore. We keep hearing about zoning and rent control and price control, but we aren’t seeing any controls! We’re seeing prices double every five years…*

*SCORING OUT*

SEAN: Sounds like the locals might be dealing with a gentrification type of situation. Is that being addressed?

AMANDA:So one of our mayors implemented subsidies for low and middle income housing. Relax some zoning restrictions and things like increasing support for public legal services.

SEAN: Hmm. Sounds like they’re rolling the dice on that one. Same deal with the social aspects here? A bunch of newcomers fleeing to an established town? Maybe some race stuff a la, you know, reality?

AMANDA: Yeah. Yeah. Again, that's tricky. Near the end of the piece, we had a huge disaster happens.

*[NEWS REPORT THEME]*

*NEWS ANCHOR JOAN: They are calling it Cruel September.*

*NEWS ANCHOR KATHY: That’s right, Joan. Nicholas, Odette and Rose: Three category 5 hurricanes just absolutely* battering *the Florida panhandle.*

*JOAN: 4000 dead, and a* flood *of over 1 million American refugees looking for homes.*

SCORING OUT

AMANDA: So we included that because we wanted to make this piece as realistic as possible. And unfortunately, there's a lot of anti immigration, anti-migration sentiments.

*[NEWS REPORT THEME]*  
  
*NEWS ANCHOR JOAN: Yes Kathy, the antimigration group “Moms for Opportunity” group is really catching on. Most people are discovering them through Jennifer Pike’s popular braincast: Make No Moves.*

*JENNIFER PIKE (“Moms for Opportunity”): People get mad when I say this, but... I understand why people see a new family with, like, ten kids move onto their block and think, ‘Hmm. Where are these people from? What are they doing here?’ You know? I get it.*

SCORING OUT

AMANDA: This seems like the kind of thing that could happen. So now we have to ask, how do we prevent something like that from happening? And I think it will rely on individual solutions for each city, like investing in schools, and cultural programs, and maybe language programs. We end the piece with this big campaign that's put out across the country and then a smaller campaign that's focused on the city called the ‘Us All’ Campaign. And we've created these posters that say “Our prosperity needs us all. Our tomorrow needs us all. Our communities need us all.” It’s about coming together as a community and solving these problems.

SEAN: Which almost feels like, I don't know, it's wild to say this, but it feels sort of naive, considering the moment we're in right now, socially, politically in this country. I mean, did this feel like a sort of fantastic vision of the future when you were making it?

AMANDA: The goal of this was to create something more positive and more solutions oriented. Now, we wanted to make it realistic. So we do have, you know, a national hate group in there called Moms for Opportunity. And we do have protests and we do have people who are not happy that migrants are coming into the city. We do have disasters. We have... Leeside doesn't do everything right. It's certainly not a utopian city. And it's not a perfect path forward for a climate haven or a receiver city. But we hear so many stories and we read so often about the cities that are going to be devastated and the people who will lose their homes and the places that are going to end up underwater. We thought it's time to start thinking about, well, what's next? How do we move forward? How do we create places then that will be welcoming homes to the people who have to leave? And cities need to start thinking about this. I mean, the future we're talking about is only a few decades from now, and that's not very far in the future when it comes to the length scales for city development. So, yeah, you're right that it comes across as kind of utopian, but, and this is actually a quote that I gave one of the mayors … “You have to imagine a positive future before you can start to build it.”

SCORING - YOUR GLASS EYE  
  
AMANDA: So we wanted to do that.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Amanda Shendruk [SHEN-druck] is a reporter at Quartz. They did a really swell job of bringing the town of Leeside to life on the internet. To find it, just search for “Leeside” at Q Z dot com. That’s L E E S I D E.

Thanks to Kate Daily, Jenn Williams, Carlos Maza, Schuyler Swenson, and Christina Animashaun for helping bring our Leeside to life. We had editing help from Amy Drozdowska.

I’m Sean Rameswaram. It’s Today, Explained.