

Hennepin County ready to increase the heat on climate change

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Byline: DAVID CHANEN; STAFF WRITER, STAR TRIBUNE (Mpls.-St. Paul)

Highlight: Plan includes more than 200 strategies, including electric cars, efficient buildings.

Body

Hennepin County is on the verge of playing a larger role in curbing global **climate change**, rolling out hundreds of new strategies aimed at driving down greenhouse gas emissions across the county.

The proposal recommends adding bike lanes on county roads, transitioning to a new fleet of electric cars and overhauling county buildings to maximize efficiency. The county would begin taking steps to adapt to a time when the local **climate** becomes more moderate, even modifying pavement and sidewalk designs to accommodate **changes** in freeze and thaw cycles.

"We have to demonstrate to the community we are serious about this," County Board Chairwoman Marion Greene said. "The work of other county issues goes on, but **climate change** is an important piece of that work."

The county is finalizing a 59-page **Climate** Action Plan that includes more than 200 strategies to reduce **climate change** as new research shows that the area's **climate** is getting wetter and that low temperatures in winter are getting warmer.

Hennepin would be the first Minnesota county committing to a formal **climate** action plan, joining a growing number of counties across the country adopting similar measures. A new wave of cities and counties started adopting or strengthening **climate** plans after former President Donald Trump decided in 2017 that the United States would begin withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, an international treaty on **climate change**.

Some critics said the plans are feel-good measures that are of little consequence.

"The science of addressing a global problem at the county level is the definition of virtue signaling," said state Rep. Pat Garofalo, R-Farmington, who has advocated for electric car usage at the Capitol. "It doesn't do anything for the **climate** and just makes some consultants more money."

In the spring of 2019, Greene and Commissioner Debbie Goettel directed staff to develop a **climate** plan. It will serve as the foundation for planning, policy development and responses to **climate change**, said Greene. There were 55 staffers on 20 teams that participated.

"We have concrete elements to the plan," Greene said. "There has been a lot of **changes** on the board [with three new commissioners this year], but they are very committed on this issue."

The plan lays out the **climate change** risks posed to Hennepin County residents, infrastructure and natural resources, saying they warrant "a significant and coordinated response."

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In the past year, staff gathered feedback from county business lines, cities, watershed and park districts and public partners. In November, they held a series of sessions with community groups, youth and the county's newly formed Race Equity Advisory Council. More than 2,300 residents responded to a survey.

While the county has already done some significant work to combat climate change, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 15%, Greene said she wants the county to require more energy efficiency on new construction and build more transit.

A significant county goal is a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 30% by 2025 and 80% by 2050. Much of the success so far has come through Xcel Energy's expansion of renewable energy sources, the report said. Yet emissions from waste and wastewater treatment, transportation and energy generation from natural gas have changed little over the past 12 years.

The report stated that changes in climate will cause more air pollution and flash flooding, mold and bacteria in buildings and respiratory threats. Other issues include the risk of extreme heat that can make residents with underlying health conditions sicker, transmission of West Nile virus and Lyme disease as a result of warmer and wetter conditions, and mental health problems caused by the trauma of extreme weather.

A sizable portion of the initiative is a focus on low-income residents, people of color and those with disabilities. The report found that these groups contribute least to the problem of climate pollution but suffer the worst effects. They tend to live in areas with the worst air pollution, that are most likely to flood and that are the least likely to have air conditioning.

Transportation issues are another large focus of the report. In 2019, vehicle travel produced 35% of all greenhouse gas emissions within the county. But remote work during the pandemic has lowered emissions by 8%.

The report also suggested an expansion of transit-oriented development for bikes and pedestrians, more park-and-rides and encouraging residents to buy vehicles that pollute less. The county set a goal of converting 20% of its light duty fleet vehicles to electric and 50% to hybrid by 2030.

Waste and material use is another area the county wants to tackle. Priorities include the support of food rescue efforts to divert more food to people in need, helping businesses and organizations reduce food waste, and recycling 75% of waste and taking no waste to landfills by 2030.

The report is a draft, so public comment will continue for several weeks before the board votes on a final version in April, said Rosemary Lavin, the county's director of Energy and Environment who helped prepare the report.

Hennepin did look at climate change assessments completed in other counties, including King County in Washington and Ramsey County. Ramsey County completed an assessment in 2016 with the aim of identifying populations and areas susceptible to climate change.

Chris LaTondresse, one of the three new commissioners on the board, said he learned on the campaign trail that residents have an intense interest in environmental justice. That included high school students who started a group called the Minnetonka Climate Initiative, aimed at encouraging young people to be leaders on climate change.

"This plan consists of hundreds of hours of community conversation and engagement," he said. "We are setting the gold standard."

David Chanen · 612-673-4465

CLIMATE GOALS

Cut greenhouse gases by 80% by 2050

Build more mass transit options

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Transition county fleet to electric or hybrid power

Make county buildings more energy-efficient

Add rain gardens, green roofs

Improve racial equity

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