Five ways Atlanta can fight climate change

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Credit: Sam Baskin

By Sam Baskin, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Climate action is often discussed in terms of individual action, but experts say governments can have a larger impact on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Two-thirds of Americans think that the federal government should do more to fight climate change, according to research from the Pew Research Center, but local efforts can also help significantly.

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Here are five of the top solutions that experts say the city of Atlanta can implement to mitigate climate change:

Renewables

Energy use is the top source of greenhouse gas emissions in the city, according to the Atlanta Climate Action Plan. Atlanta purchases its electricity from Georgia Power which, as of 2020, uses only 3% renewable energy. Climate experts recommend the city request that Georgia Power invests more in solar farms. While the city doesn't have direct control over Georgia Power, the city can take action to push for more clean energy in integrated resource plan meetings with Georgia Power which take place every three years.

Additionally, Marilyn Brown, Ph.D., a Georgia Tech professor whose research focuses on sustainable energy policies, states that the city can foster purchase power agreements. Brown states, "They can help to foster what they call purchase power agreements, where cities and entities can specify the power source from which they

Electric Vehicles

Transportation is the second largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Atlanta. To reduce carbon emissions, Jario Garcia, Ph.D., a professor in sustainable urban development at Georgia Tech, recommends a combination of subsidizing charging stations, electrifying city vehicles and extending Atlanta's bike lane network. This would include working with MARTA to electrify buses. Atlanta can access federal funds for these projects from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

Efficient Buildings

In addition to decarbonizing energy at the source, the city can also make the application of that energy more efficient by increasing energy efficiency compliance in buildings. The state has many energy efficient codes in law, but Atlanta's compliance laws don't always enforce them.
According to Brown, "Every new building is supposed to comply with the new construction codes, but because the codes are not well enforced, you can have buildings built today that are still inefficient." The city can reduce energy consumption in buildings by increasing compliance and having new compliance training when Georgia building codes are updated every three years.

Compost

Compostable materials in waste creates approximately 4% of Atlanta's greenhouse gas emissions, according to the Atlanta Climate Action Plan, published in 2015. Garcia recommends that the city establishes a fleet of trucks to collect composting and then only after that, implement a pay-as-you-throw policy. Pay-as-you-throw would mean that companies and individuals would have to pay more as they send more trash to the landfill. The policy assumes that most of that trash could instead be sent to composting or recycling centers. According to Garcia, "There are companies in Atlanta that want to compost, but they need help from the city in order to collect the composting materials."

Trees

Atlanta already struggles with both heat and floods, both of which are expected to increase due to climate change. One easy way to cool down neighborhoods and reduce flooding is to plant trees and other green infrastructure. According to the EPA, trees cool surrounding air and surfaces, capture carbon emissions, help manage stormwater and lower AC costs of nearby buildings. According to [TREE STUDY] planting trees can cool an area by [XX]°F. Garcia recommends that the city works with organizations such as UrbanHeatATL to identify vulnerable areas, and deploy green infrastructure in those neighborhoods.