

Getting to Zero: A Regional Climate Roundtable

Chicago Roundtable -- August 5-6, 2020

Key Takeaways

Overarching Themes

- Close coordination of state, city and regional efforts can greatly enhance the effectiveness of policies and programs aimed at decarbonizing the building sector.
- Stronger investment is essential, but new policies are also needed to achieve ambitious decarbonization goals. Building codes, stretch codes, and building performance standards are all important mechanisms.
- Decarbonization strategies must integrate economic, public health, and environmental justice objectives.
- It is key to have a portfolio of interconnected programs, as braiding together complementary efforts is essential to success, particularly in a resource constrained environment.
- Policies should prioritize improving the performance of the existing building stock.
- A statewide decarbonization goal can help cities maintain competitiveness and prevent emissions leakage at the local level.
- Businesses have unique and important voices in policy discussions, and need to better communicate their support for policy to legislators.
- Further convening of stakeholders in the Chicago region can help strengthen collaboration and accelerate efforts to address energy efficiency and decarbonization broadly.

Session 1: ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE RESIDENTIAL BUILDING SECTOR

- Community involvement from the beginning in policy discussions is important to understand challenges faced by constituents and how they believe those challenges can be addressed, and to assess available resources.
- Environmental justice means investing in black and brown communities – *at scale*, e.g., prioritizing them as customers and vendors, building up workforce pipelines, and allocating more programs, discounts, and rebates that put these communities first.
- Retrofitting homes, rather than demolition and new construction, is the best way to address climate change while preserving affordable housing and helping marginalized communities benefit from the multi-generational wealth creation associated with property ownership.
- Cities need to have stable, long-term funding and staff to address policy initiatives – Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grants, AmeriCorps, and CivicSpark have been effective resources for municipalities.
- It's also important to be creative about potential funding streams, e.g., property taxes can be another source of funding for cities.
- New policies should set clear goals tied to environmental health and justice and reducing energy costs.

- There is a need to make homes weatherization-ready for low-income residents: dedicated funding is necessary and should be coordinated with other programs such as weatherization and utility programs.
- Electrification is key, and can drive skilled job creation, but is also inextricably tied to questions of affordability and energy burden (the percentage of a household's income spent on energy costs).
- Chicago's older buildings will not withstand all-electric conversions without significant infrastructure improvement. Health and safety improvements in particular can have synergies with renewable energy and energy efficiency home upgrades.

Session 2: DECARBONIZING COMMERCIAL AND PUBLIC BUILDINGS

- Policy tools for improving existing buildings' energy use include tying building performance standards to point of sale or point of lease.
- With a building performance standard, building owners within a geographic area who are held to the same mandate could allow district energy solutions to be more effectively deployed.
- Demonstration is key and providing case examples will help drive broader adoption.
- It is important for cities to consider what's within their grasp and implement a process for action that builds support from the ground up, i.e., localities first. Meeting people where they are and helping them through the next phase of adoption (regardless of their starting point) is key.
- Building owners and investors will be key to decarbonizing commercial buildings. The investment and the building communities must engage more closely with one another, and building owners need to better understand finance options and incentives for action. PACE has not been as successful as intended in eliminating financing barriers.
- Allowing real estate investment trusts (REITs) to monetize renewable energy tax credits would allow them to invest more in renewable energy, which they have an appetite for.
- Government leadership is key, but we can't rely on government as a convener for stakeholder conversations. Organizations and businesses should consider priorities (e.g., developing a robust buildings performance standard) and how to facilitate the necessary convenings.