

How San Diego Won 100% Renewables: An interview with Nicole Capretz



San Diego Bay (photo via Jeffrey Zeldman on Flickr)

On December 15, the City of San Diego announced its remarkable new [Climate Action Plan](#), committing the city to 100% renewable power by the year 2035, and, by the same year, slashing its carbon emissions by half.

Even more astonishing, Republican Mayor Kevin Faulconer proposed it and the Council voted unanimously to make their climate plan legally binding. In other words, there's legal accountability should San Diego fail to reach their targets.

So how did America's 8th largest city enact this visionary plan?

To find answers, I called Nicole Capretz, the brilliant organizer behind the new policy.

This is what I learned.

For years, Nicole served as an environmental staffer to San Diego council members and mayors, as well as the environmental nonprofit organization Environmental Health Coalition. Over the course of two years, Nicole used her perch from within government to build support. In early 2015, when the policy attained sufficient momentum, Nicole left the city and founded the organization Climate Action Campaign to nudge the city towards acting on the policy.

External events also forced the city to act.

San Diego County was the target of two major climate-related lawsuits: its general plan significantly failed to reckon with greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), as did the transportation plan developed by San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), which sought to carve-out new freeways rather than build bus, rail, and bikeways. (Important side note: S.D. County and SANDAG's antediluvian legal appeals have failed every time.)

The County's embarrassing performance on climate prodded the city to find new ways of tackling GHGs and to succeed where

the county failed. In addition to robust energy efficiency and renewable goals, the city envisions that, by 2035, 50% of commuter trips in identified transit corridors will be taken by bike, transit, or walking.

Public support was also key. On a shoestring budget, the Climate Action Campaign went out to San Diego's fifty-plus Community Planning Groups (akin to LA's neighborhood councils.) It may surprise some, but these community groups became the backbone of the campaign.

In addition, Sierra Club San Diego, Environmental Health Coalition, CleanTech San Diego, Circulate San Diego, American Lung Association, labor groups (especially IBEW and the nurses union) played key roles. At the end of the day, even the San Diego Chamber of Commerce and Building Industry Association testified in favor of the climate plan!

Research was also essential. The Rocky Mountain Institute and successful community choice energy programs in northern California provided data on the viability of the 100% renewable goal. Polling data from University of San Diego also showed widespread appetite for action. (The ongoing drought and unseasonably hot weather further contributed to a sense of urgency.)

Although San Diego Gas & Electric lobbied hard to modify the climate policy, Mayor Faulconer stood firm.

Nicole says her Climate Action Campaign is now working to win over other cities in San Diego County, as well as tracking the city's implementation plan.

In sum, I offer a few takeaways from my conversation with Nicole:

- San Diego lesson #1. You need smart inside-of-government advocates. In San Diego, it was Nicole and her colleagues who were able to overcome numerous institutional barriers.
- Lesson #2. You need an outside force. The broad-based coalition of environmental, business, and labor groups — and especially the community organizations — forced City Hall to act.
- Lesson #3. Environmentalists need to talk with the neighborhood councils. (Kudos to the L.A. Neighborhood Council Sustainability Alliance for doing just that.) And there's always room to improve our relationship with labor and business.
- Lesson #4. The State of California and its climate policies are fundamental. Period. Laws and regulations inform how municipalities form their policies, and further provide a stick when these municipalities fail to act.
- Lesson #5. Vision is everything. San Diego decided to think big and reach big. And they got there.

Thanks Nicole — we can all learn from your success.

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