Executive Summary

A Green New Deal for California Cities: Empowering Communities Through Climate Infrastructure

Background

In an era defined by an escalating climate crisis and the urgent need for sustainable solutions, the Inflation Reduction Act, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and CHIPS and Science Act present opportunities to reshape the way communities approach energy, sustainability, and economic development. These and other funding opportunities could be instrumental in providing for just transitions in communities historically reliant on or crippled by pollutive industries — that is, economic transitions away from extractive and high-emissions industries that support workers and communities to ensure they are not left behind. But if just transitions are to be successful, they must be determined through democratic participation, guaranteeing that new industries are culturally, economically, and environmentally suited to their host communities. This means asking communities what they envision for their futures.

To that end, Data for Progress conducted five workshops focused on climate infrastructure across California — in Palo Alto, Eureka, Visalia, Palmdale, and San Diego — from June to November 2023. The aim was not to convince communities to accept climate infrastructure, but rather to understand from community members themselves what key factors drive openness or opposition to energy sources and climate technologies — which we refer to broadly as climate infrastructure — after learning more about them. These workshops focused on six utility-scale clean energy sources and technologies — solar, wind, nuclear, geothermal, battery storage, and transmission — as well as four carbon removal technologies — direct air capture (DAC), biomass with carbon sequestration and storage (BiCRS), enhanced rock weathering (ERW), and ocean alkalinity enhancement (OAE). In addition, Data for Progress conducted a statewide survey to assess Californians' attitudes toward climate infrastructure developments.

California has consistently led the U.S. in adopting policies to combat climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, making the state a natural case in which to explore community responses to climate infrastructure development. But while California has led the country in building some of the first utility-scale clean energy projects, communities have met development with considerable opposition. The potential for climate policy, and especially climate infrastructure development, to receive pushback from communities

(and thus jeopardize broader goals) points to a strong need to engage with residents ahead of potential development and policy deployment to understand redlines, barriers, and perceived opportunities of such actions. This research aims to do just that — understand *whether* and *how* community members might support these various pathways to climate infrastructure development.

Workshop Findings

- ***Trusted actors are key to promoting communication and preempting misunderstanding in successful infrastructure projects.***
    - ***Varied trust in government and local institutions:*** Across different communities in California, participants expressed varying levels of trust in local government and institutions, with many preferring direct engagement in and governance of new infrastructure projects.
    - ***Widespread distrust of utility companies:*** Participants across all sites distrusted utility companies as a result of high costs, lack of reliability, and, in particular, mismanagement of utility assets that have led directly to wildfires in the state.

- ***Participants saw the potential social, economic, health, and environmental risks and opportunities of large-scale climate infrastructure.***
    - ***Environmental and health concerns:*** Across all sites, participants raised concerns about the potential environmental and health risks of new climate infrastructure projects, with participants often raising concerns specific to their community. With California situated upon several fault lines and thus vulnerable to earthquakes, participants were worried about potential seismic impacts from technologies operating in the subsurface. At a minimum, participants were hopeful that any new project would not worsen existing pollution and health burdens.
    - ***Economic revitalization through climate action:*** Across all sites, participants expressed clear anticipation of potential economic uplift from new climate projects, with many emphasizing the need for new jobs to be long-term, to prioritize local workers and young people, and to offer job training, strong wages, and wraparound benefits.

- ***Climate infrastructure must align with communities' sense of place to earn social license and steward the local environment.***
    - ***Safeguarding local identity and natural environment:*** Workshop participants expressed varying attitudes toward local development. In Palo Alto, "NIMBY" ("not in my backyard") sentiments were prevalent, whereas participants in Eureka expressed a readiness to embrace climate innovation and technologies. Visalia and Palmdale participants contended that projects must not undermine community resilience, affordability, and aspirations for a healthier future. San Diegans expressed openness to projects that could integrate into the city at the neighborhood level.
    - ***Community ownership and empowerment:*** Conversations across sites revealed a pronounced preference for community ownership and oversight, especially where distrust toward corporations and utilities was evident. In Eureka, this led to strongly expressed support for a community ownership model, where climate infrastructure benefits, like reduced energy costs, are directly passed on to residents.

Survey Findings

- ***A majority of Californians support clean infrastructure being built in their community.*** While more than 4 in 5 Californians would support a new clean energy project in their community (82%), respondents perceive their community's appetite for new clean infrastructure projects to be slightly lower (75%).
- ***A majority of Californians want clean infrastructure projects to be publicly owned.*** A majority of Californians (60%) prefer such projects to be publicly owned and operated, instead of privately owned (26%).
- ***Californians say it is most important that a new project produces clean energy (51%) and lowers their bills in some way (38%)***, followed by providing new jobs in their community (34%) and having minimal impacts on local ecosystems (32%).
- ***Californians most want community leaders (73%) and environmental groups (73%) involved in negotiating local community benefits with developers of proposed new infrastructure***, followed by public, nonprofit organizations (66%), small business owners (65%), and local government leaders (64%).
- ***Californians most want project developers to guarantee community benefits (84%) and consult communities when selecting a site for projects (83%)***, followed by conducting community engagement workshops in the communities where they place projects (81%).

Recommendations

From the community workshops and survey, we offer several recommendations for climate infrastructure development in California, including:

- ***Build trust by embedding community co-creation, oversight, and potential for co-ownership:*** Climate infrastructure can and must be regulated and governed as a public good to meet climate goals — where communities and workers have the opportunity to own and co-create projects to maximize the benefits presented by this suite of technologies;
- ***Address high costs, regulatory failures, and mismanagement of California's utilities:*** New climate infrastructure projects must work to shore up grid reliability, hold utility companies accountable, cap — and ultimately deliver savings on — utility bills, and prevent mismanagement of infrastructure, like transmission lines;
- ***Establish a role for public, Tribal and community leadership in climate infrastructure:*** Federal and state governments, Tribal groups, individual communities, and workers should have a role in determining the scope of climate infrastructure projects and claiming ownership of individual projects. Public and cooperative ownership structures that put communities or workers in charge offer greater avenues to embed equity, responsibility, and justice into projects;
- ***Ensure climate infrastructure projects are sensitive to place-based concerns and needs:*** Participants across all five sites highlighted the diverse and complex histories and place-based concerns of the communities in which they work, live, and play, underscoring the importance of aligning climate infrastructure to the differing needs and histories of communities;
- ***Establish guardrails for fossil fuel-led climate infrastructure:*** Climate technologies must be deployed alongside plans to fully phase out dirty industries. Responsible climate policy requires the simultaneous elimination of the industries that have knowingly driven the climate crisis while delaying mitigation strategies, ultimately necessitating these clean energy and carbon management technologies;
- ***Alleviate cumulative impacts in overburdened communities:*** Projects must define and respond to cumulative impacts of existing polluting infrastructure and proposed new projects — especially those in already overburdened communities — so new projects don't further endanger residents;
- ***Build the unionized, local, and diverse workforce of the future:*** Projects should include binding project labor agreements that guarantee the quantity, quality, and conditions of jobs. Moreover, projects should prioritize jobs for local workers,

people from traditionally underserved communities, and workers traditionally underrepresented in infrastructure projects. Projects should also invest in job training and workforce development, creating pathways to careers through apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs; and

- ***Prioritize equity- and consent-based siting practices:*** Communities should have the final say in what projects happen in the community, with the right to reject climate infrastructure projects outright if a project is deemed incompatible with their needs. Importantly, however, equity-based siting practices and robust community consultation could encourage climate infrastructure development in communities that have traditionally avoided infrastructure development. Climate and restorative justice demands that we work to equitably site new infrastructure projects to not just *maximize local benefits*, like jobs, but also *minimize cumulative burdens* in long-overburdened communities.

Conclusion

Workshops in five California communities and a statewide survey demonstrate diverse perspectives on climate infrastructure, highlighting the complex interplay between environmental action and community values — and the need to link the two. These findings underscore the critical importance of embedding community voices in the planning and implementation phases of climate projects. Trust, transparency, and genuine participatory processes emerge as nonnegotiable pillars for aligning projects with the unique cultural, historical, and environmental fabrics of communities. This approach not only can help secure community buy-in but also leverage local knowledge to mitigate risks and amplify benefits, ensuring that infrastructure developments address the needs of those they are intended to serve.