

PLANNERS ARE UNIQUE STEWARDS OF THE CLIMATE

DECEMBER 2, 2022 BY Ted Knowlton, Past President of the APAUtah Chapter

I am focusing on climate change for my last article as part of APAUtah leadership because I believe this is the single most important issue of our time and one that is squarely in where planners can make a difference. I hope you will join me in being a steward of the climate.

A classic rationale of having city planning (“zoning”) has been to address the tragedy of the commons: a condition in which individual actions are taken that have substantial negatives for the community that in turn outweigh the benefits accrued by individuals. “Hey buddy, even though you would make money burning tires in your backyard, the community impact significantly outweighs that decision. Therefore we are zoning out your tire burning.”

In Utah we have become used to thinking and sometimes acting on the tragedy of the air quality commons. For example, allowing more housing by transit stations — despite neighborhood opposition — because it is better to have our new housing in locations where residents can choose low-emission transportation.

Well the biggest tragedy of the commons by far is the impact of greenhouse gas emissions on our climate. Global warming. Despite potential broad benefits to the climate we all share, when confronted with the task of reducing green-house gas emissions (GHG) the benefit that any individual or community would get by doing their part is often seen as not sufficient to justify the individual/community pain of taking those actions.

This is indeed a tragedy! We are in the middle of a global fight to stabilize the climate and we are losing. One doesn’t have to go far to see the consequences. We are experiencing severe drought and impacts on the Great Salt Lake, Virgin River, and the Colorado River and extreme weather phenomena like 123 degrees seen last summer in Canada (which was previously considered impossible, a 0% chance event) that have been influenced by global warming.

But allow me to put a finer point on this. The significant global warming that we are on pace to trigger could lead to hundreds of millions of deaths due to heat exposure in the tropics and subtropics. This would also mean mass migration from countries in the tropics and subtropics as people seek to flee frequently occurring and long stretches of extreme heat. This migration would be unlike anything ever seen in human history. Migration would be amplified by the displacement along our coasts. Sea level rise will directly displace millions, but the recurring extreme weather like storm surge would likewise cause perhaps hundreds of millions of people to look for other locations to live. What we would likely have in this unfortunately very real scenario is global population churning.

Now add on top of migration the likelihood of global food insecurity caused by a significant drop in food production caused by warming, extreme weather events, and that mass migration. Heat reduces crop yields – for example wheat yields fall 6% for each 1 degree celsius increase, and new settlements that spread from migration would likely consume a significant amount of farmland. Mass migration and starvation combined would lead to war upon war as countries try to hold borders and hand on to scarce

resources. Unmitigated global warming would usher in a very long era of extreme weather events, war and scarcity that would affect *every* household in significant ways.

So...one of the best ways to address a tragedy of the commons (TOC) is to get together and put in place a shared agreement to reduce individual damage in order to achieve optimal costs versus benefits for us all. By the way, this is essentially what planners do! We have watched as the world met in Egypt as countries negotiated a global agreement. We can hope the agreements will be enough and that each country will do their part.

Meanwhile in Utah there is no direct shared agreement to mitigate GHG. We should ask our leaders to explore this together. But faced with a TOC in the absence of a shared agreement the deeply ethical thing to do is to “do your own part”. This is called stewardship – we all act responsibly for what we have stewardship over.

We can be stewards of the climate as individuals, households, and the communities in which we plan. Now unfortunately for most of our local governments in Utah, just as with our State, there is little interest in addressing global warming per se. The link between emitting greenhouse gases and the changes to the climate we see hasn't been internalized by most leaders in Utah. The beautiful thing is that there are many ways we can mitigate climate change that make our lives better. I.e., we don't have to talk about global warming itself in order to be better stewards of the climate. The efficient development patterns that save individuals and communities money, like enabling more growth in downtowns and TOD, also reduces GHG per person. Community planning that enables people to meet their needs closer to home or by foot, bike, or transit also reduces GHG per person.

WE NEED QUICK WINS

What I want to stress in this article is that we as a planning community need to also focus on solutions that can reduce community GHG quickly. Patterns of development can take years to pay dividends, but the need to stabilize the climate is immediate and every year counts.

In addition to land development ideas, let's bring quick hitting ideas to your elected officials that make life better while also helping to mitigate climate change. These include:

Tree planting programs. Require Street trees and start a tree planting program in existing areas. Put more trees in your city parks. Ensure trees stay a part of your landscaping standards as you seek to become more water wise — in our efforts to adapt to our changing climate we shouldn't release more GHG.

Bike infrastructure can be put in place relatively quickly and can easily be incorporated into individual transportation decisions — especially if that infrastructure serves important community destinations or transit stops. A change in one's local transportation patterns towards bicycling can reduce the air pollution that Utahns do care about in addition to reducing GHG

I am focusing on climate change for my last article as part of APAUtah leadership because this is the single most important issue of our time and one where planners can squarely make a difference. I hope you will join me in being a steward of the climate.