



# **Assessing the state of climate action in Ontario municipalities: the drivers and barriers to implementation**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## About Clean Air Partnership

Clean Air Partnership (CAP) is a charitable environmental organization launched in June, 2000. CAP's mission is to help municipalities become sustainable, resilient, vibrant communities where resources are used efficiently, the air is clean to breathe and greenhouse gas emissions are minimized. We achieve this mission through research, knowledge transfer, and by fostering collaboration among all orders of government, academia, NGOs and a range of additional stakeholders.



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# INTRODUCTION

Through Milestone 4 of the [FCM-ICLEI Partners for Climate Protection \(PCP\) program](#), Ontario municipalities submit implementation reports detailing the status of their climate action plan implementation. These reports can help illustrate the extent of climate action in the province.

This research has examined M4 reports submitted from 14 Ontario municipalities and, in conjunction with an interview series with 9 of these, identified the drivers and barriers for successful climate action implementation.

This report is divided into 4 sections. Sections 1 and 2 outline cross-sectoral drivers and barriers to climate action implementation. Section 3 highlights pertinent sector-specific drivers and barriers. Section 4 outlines the strategies that municipalities have used to overcome barriers to implementation. These are offered as recommendations to other municipalities seeking to advance implementation. This report focuses on community-level climate actions as these have the potential to achieve the greenhouse gas emissions reduction benefits necessary to successfully tackle climate change.

# 1. CROSS-SECTORAL DRIVERS OF CLIMATE ACTION IMPLEMENTATION

## FUNDING

Securing funding was a lynchpin driver of successful climate implementation across multiple sectors. Municipalities capitalised on a range of funding programs from the Federal and Provincial Governments such as [NRCan's Electric Vehicle and Alternative Fuel Infrastructure Deployment Initiative](#) and [Ontario's Electric Vehicle Charging Incentive Program](#) among others. The importance of [FCM's Green Municipal Fund](#) was highlighted as a particularly useful funding stream. Furthermore, municipalities often achieved implementation success by securing project/program funding from multiple sources; one example being the deployment of a light rail transit system which leveraged funds from the Federal and Provincial Governments as well as municipal budgets. This was useful in spreading the risk of funding withdrawal, winning the support of municipal decision makers and highlighting the co-benefits of climate initiatives (see Section 4).

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Many municipalities have successfully advanced a wide range of climate actions in partnership with other community organisations such as utilities, NGOs and conservation authorities among others. Some municipalities also created and funded local NGOs, aiding in the development of a terms of reference, governance structure and board of directors.

The central advantage of this partnership approach was that it reduced municipal risk and resources (financial and otherwise) by leveraging staff and community partner skills and experience. This approach varied widely depending on the type of climate action and partner in question. Examples included the use of conservation authorities for community outreach to increase participation in a home energy retrofit project, and the expansion of bike share service providers into new geographic areas to serve a wider community.

Related to this, a number of municipalities successfully partnered with institutions such as colleges, universities and hospitals. Institutions were identified as high potential community stakeholders to support a range of climate actions. These institutions are often both an independent land owner and also a decision making body. Because many institutions have developed GHG inventories and climate action plans, they were supportive of such synergistic partnerships. Municipalities partnered with institutions to deliver a host of actions including bike share and carpooling programs, EV charging stations and energy retrofits among others. Some municipalities were also able to create specific funding mechanisms for schools and other educational institutions for building energy retrofits, and were able to promote and support Federal, Provincial and utility-driven funding programs to their institutional partners

## STAFF CAPACITY

Municipalities were also able to advance climate action by hiring new staff (where resources allowed). Firstly, this gave increased capacity to directly liaise with community partners, coordinate outreach, and raise awareness for climate programs. Secondly, there was increased capacity to coordinate climate actions internally across multiple municipal departments. Finally, this gave increased capacity to integrate a greater number of municipal policies, plans and programs with GHG reduction objectives (see Section 4).

Municipalities had also advanced successful implementation through hiring grants administrators dedicated to monitoring, selecting and applying for applicable funding streams. Given funding was so integral to successful implementation, and in the context of ongoing staff capacity issues within municipal climate change offices, this was of particular advantage.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIZATION

The strategic prioritization of climate initiatives, based on a detailed understanding of a municipality's socio-economic fabric and natural environment, was another implementation driver. In a number of jurisdictions, prioritizing key initiatives made it easier to secure funding and wider support from both key decision makers as well as community stakeholders. An example of this is the prioritization of electric vehicle initiatives as they aligned well with the desires of senior political figures to create a culture of innovation. More generally, strategic prioritization such as this has enabled municipalities to more efficiently use resources to maximize climate benefits and minimize overall costs.



## 2. CROSS-SECTORAL BARRIERS TO CLIMATE ACTION IMPLEMENTATION

### LOW CLIMATE LITERACY

Poor climate literacy, both within municipalities and the community, was a general barrier to implementation. Within the municipality, this was stated to constrain the ability of other departments to understand and incorporate climate-related information into their own decision making. Of particular concern was poor climate literacy among senior managers and city councillors which reduced the ability of environmental staff to secure funding.

Furthermore, interviewees also highlighted that limited climate literacy and awareness in the community is a general barrier to their climate programs. For example, reduced awareness of both financial supports from banks and local utilities for home energy retrofits and the availability of alternative transportation initiatives were examples of how this leads to reduced community participation in climate programs. Interviewees also highlighted that ongoing low attendance at municipally-led community outreach events made it hard to justify interventions and overcome this barrier.

### STAFF TURNOVER

High rates of staff turnover also hindered implementation with one municipality interviewed having had 4 different climate change coordinators in 4 years. This made it difficult for climate programs to mature and reach latter stages (i.e. from planning and pilot stages towards monitoring, reporting and program evaluation). In turn, this led to staff having limited information on how to improve existing programs and justify additional funding and support from key decision makers. High staff turnover also made it difficult to accumulate the experience needed to anticipate grant application windows and construct successful applications. Four-year municipal election cycles, and the resultant shifting priorities in council, created a similar barrier whereby funding and other supports were often provided in a stop-start fashion.

As outlined in Section 4, the creation of senior strategic/interdepartmental climate change teams can be a way to overcome this staff turnover barrier and ensure succession planning and secure longer-term support for climate initiatives.

### 3. SECTOR-SPECIFIC DRIVERS AND BARRIERS

Sector specific drivers and barriers are described in this section for new buildings, building retrofits, transportation and energy.

#### NEW BUILDINGS

Within the new buildings sector, the implementation of green development standards (GDS) has faced numerous barriers relating to the uncertainty over whether municipalities have the legal authority to implement GDS. Stakeholders from the development community have put up strong resistance against the creation of GDS; commonly advocating that municipalities do not have the legal authority to mandate standards higher than the Ontario Building Code. Compounding this, municipalities have also experienced differences of opinion internally as to their exact legal authority to mandate higher than the Building Code.

Municipalities also highlighted the absence of any regional GDS program as a barrier to implementation. GDS programs at the individual municipal-level, requiring developers to adhere to different local requirements, can make compliance difficult. This strengthens resistance from the development community and was a particular barrier in the GTA. Municipalities noted that progress on GDS was, and continues to be, highly contingent on the strengths, weaknesses and recommendations emerging from evaluations of the [Toronto Green Standard](#). Many municipalities have been hesitant based on the lack of previous implementation experience across the Province.

Some municipalities were (and still are) engaged in advocacy work to the Province to elevate the environmental performance standards required by the Ontario Building Code. One municipality had also successfully undertaken a GDS pilot project to gain experience and build future capacity for wider implementation, verification, metric selection and so on.

#### BUILDING RETROFITS

The implementation of home energy retrofit programs also appears to have met numerous barriers. Firstly, municipalities have often struggled to assess, evaluate and decide upon financing mechanisms for home energy retrofits. Concerns around the viability of a local improvement charge (LIC) mechanism were a barrier for many municipalities. Specifically, these related to the authority of the municipality to use LICs and the additional burdens of ongoing program administration and coordination. As with the advancement of GDS, many interviewees expressed that work towards implementing home energy retrofit programs was stalled pending reports from other jurisdictions that are using LIC financing.

Among the municipalities interviewed, one jurisdiction had successfully implemented a one-off neighbourhood-scale home energy retrofit pilot project. Partnership development

between the municipality and the local conservation authority as well as access to funding were key drivers in this case. Nevertheless, the implementation of long-term retrofit programs with long term financing mechanisms has alluded nearly all Ontario municipalities.

## TRANSPORTATION

As outlined in Section 1, partnership development was a particular driver for transportation sector programs. Municipalities often partnered with bike share, car share and other alternative transportation solution providers to expand their activities over wider geographical areas; having often previously operated at smaller scales with specific community organisations (e.g. universities, hospitals etc.). Multiple municipalities had also partnered with [Plug'n Drive](#) and similar organisations to host EV education events to increase awareness and knowledge of EVs and to encourage EV adoption. Overall, these approaches enabled implementation at reduced cost to the municipality.

Funding was another key driver with the one-off [Electric Vehicles Chargers Ontario \(EVCO\) program](#), [NRCan's Electric Vehicle and Alternative Fuel Infrastructure Deployment Initiative](#) and other programs driving the deployment of EV charging stations. In a number of cases, specific funding contributions from federal, provincial and municipal government budgets funded larger infrastructure projects.

Given the multitude of economic, social and environmental benefits that transportation sector climate actions can achieve, the use of interdepartmental collaboration and decision making processes was another driver for successful implementation. This was achieved by establishing specific working groups involving a wide range of municipal decision-makers. This approach included both climate and wider socio-economic needs in program design from an early stage (e.g. transit affordability, efficiency, safety and reduced GHG emissions) to ensure less resistance at later stages of delivery.

Some transportation sector climate actions were data driven, where data on transit ridership, traffic flows and other metrics in combination with transportation sector GHG inventories and baselines were used by municipal staff to build the case for action. This helped better secure the support of key decision makers for climate-related transportation initiatives and directly inform the design and deployment of specific programs.

## ENERGY

The provision of financing mechanisms to pay for community energy projects was a key driver for successful implementation; helping to reduce high upfront capital costs that typically accompany them. Financing mechanisms varied widely from federal, provincial and municipal grant funding for energy generation projects to the use of on-bill financing for rooftop solar installations.

Wider supports aimed at reducing transaction costs and administrative burdens were also useful drivers such as the use of a low fixed-fee building permit cost and, in one novel example, the provision of a “blanket resolution of support” to all rooftop solar energy installations in the municipality; effectively fast-tracking projects through the municipal approvals process.



Municipal governments efforts to engage the Ministry of Energy in dialogue and advocacy was also an effective driver. These efforts revealed potential improvements to previous Provincial energy policy, plans and programs, as well as unaddressed barriers. These efforts led to the creation of the [Municipal Energy Plan](#) Program and improvements to the [IESO Combined Heat and Power Standard Offer](#) among others. Overall, this has helped ensure that Provincial policies, plans and programs continue to serve the needs of municipalities in their implementation of energy sector climate solutions.

The ability of municipalities to develop accurate business cases to secure funding for specific energy projects was a barrier to implementation. Furthermore, (possibly owing to the age of some M4 reports examined in this report) some municipalities recognized that community-level energy sector climate action represented a gap in their climate action portfolios; linking this to general barriers such as limited staff capacity and the absence of strong leadership and prioritization from key decision makers.



## 4. STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING BARRIERS

### SECURING SUPPORT

Climate change staff highlighted that securing support from senior managers, city councillors and other key decision makers within the municipality was key to overcoming barriers to implementation. While funding (where available) was a lynchpin driver for implementation, the lack of funding was often the first hurdle at which climate actions stalled. Securing the support of key decision makers helped overcome this barrier, strengthening funding applications, and increasing the likelihood of leveraging funding from municipal budgets and other supports. This helped overcome multiple general barriers (e.g. a lack of staff capacity).

### MAINSTREAMING CLIMATE CHANGE CONSIDERATIONS

Interviewees highlighted how climate change considerations were often poorly integrated into other municipal policies, plans and programs meaning opportunities to realise climate benefits and avoid costs were missed. To overcome this challenge, some environment / sustainability departments had been undertaking reviews and updates such that they better uphold climate change goals. Integrating climate change into the Official Plan was highlighted as particularly useful in providing a more direct mandate for the implementation of climate actions relating to land use planning and development. Municipalities had also conducted corporate re-structuring to establish more effective interdepartmental lines of communication and decision making processes as well as hiring climate-focused strategic coordinators into CAO offices. These strategies have helped to better secure the integration of climate change considerations on an ongoing basis.

### INNOVATIVE COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Many municipalities have used a traditional model for community engagement activities: municipally organised, facilitated and invited engagement events. However, low attendance rates, despite high resource inputs, was a common issue. Accordingly, some municipalities had actively tried to diversify their portfolio of community engagement approaches. This included the targeting of pre-existing community events (e.g. festivals, home shows, facility opening events etc.). Another tactic was to create pop-up community outreach work groups; affording more flexibility and the ability to more easily attend community events. These actions represented more proactive approaches to community outreach and were an effective complement to traditional events; increasing awareness of, and participation in, community climate initiatives as well as exploring community member needs while also reducing resource inputs.

# CONCLUSION

Based on interviews with 9 Ontario-based municipalities, this research has revealed a multitude of drivers and barriers that have influenced the state of climate action implementation in Ontario. These are summarized in the table below.

SECTOR		DRIVERS	BARRIERS
Cross-sectoral		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Securing funding</li> <li>• Securing the support of key decision makers</li> <li>• Partnership development</li> <li>• Targeting institutions</li> <li>• Staff hiring</li> <li>• Strategic prioritization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate change literacy and awareness</li> <li>• Staff turnover and shifting political priorities</li> </ul>
Buildings	Green development standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy to the Province</li> <li>• Pilot projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertainty over municipal legal authority</li> <li>• Lack of regional consistency</li> <li>• Forthcoming assessments of Toronto Development Standard</li> </ul>
	Home energy retrofits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership development</li> <li>• Securing funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financing mechanism viability</li> </ul>
Transportation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership development</li> <li>• Securing funding</li> <li>• Co-benefits perspective</li> <li>• Monitoring and reporting exercises</li> </ul>	
Energy		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial and non-financial supports</li> <li>• Advocacy and dialogue with Province</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project business case development</li> </ul>

Owing to the date of submission for many of the M4 reports analysed in this report, recent developments in the province of Ontario are not reflected here; most notably the cancellation of Ontario's cap-and-trade system and the withdrawal of GreenON funding.

While this has not directly removed funding for climate action, it did affect funding from the Municipal Challenge Fund. Interviewees reiterated how this change disrupted future climate change action plans and left many actions without the future funding previously anticipated. It remains to be seen how Ontario's new Environment Plan will help to address the above mentioned barriers.

For Ontario municipalities to address many of the above noted barriers and act on climate change opportunities in their communities, a long-term collaborative process bringing together Ontario municipalities, provincial ministries, and federal government departments is required.

