

Municipal Governments Collaborating to Achieve Sustainability

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Abstract

Municipal governments have unique strengths and authorities that position them to be effective sustainability champions and practitioners. When united behind consensus goals and a strategic climate action plan, municipalities can make powerful progress both at the local and regional level. In the Chicago metropolitan region, the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus convenes and leads a coalition of 165 local governments to effect pragmatic policies and make strategic investments that drive sustainability, mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and build resilience to climate change. The Greenest Region Compact is the political and practical foundation for achievements in solar energy deployment, transportation electrification, residential energy efficiency and for building capacity within municipal governments for sustainability.

Municipal Governments Collaborating to Achieve Sustainability

Why Local Governments

Local governments have unique strengths and authorities that allow them to take pragmatic and effective action to achieve sustainability and address climate change. Local, municipal governments can take steps to improve access to renewable energy, promote energy efficiency, expand sustainable transportation and so much more, greatly improving the quality of life for members of their community. When these local government actions are facilitated and coordinated across jurisdictional boundaries, as they are in the Chicago metropolitan area, the impacts on resource conservation, greenhouse gas emission reduction, and the advancement of clean energy are at a consequential scale.

Municipal government is closest to the people it serves. Unlike state or federal government officials, mayors and local elected officials live among their constituent neighbors and intimately understand local issues. In Illinois, the Open Meetings Act assures governments are transparent and accessible to the constituents they serve. Residents are welcome to attend village board or city council meetings and have a chance to openly engage with their city leaders. Most municipalities amply communicate valuable information that helps their residents access services, connect with their neighbors, and contribute to the strength and resilience of their community. Elected municipal leaders literally commission residents to contribute their interests and expertise through formal citizen commissions. These small, focused groups of citizens work with municipal officials to guide municipal actions on a variety of community issues from the arts to veteran affairs. Sustainability-focused citizen commissions are active in about 30% of the municipal members of the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus in the Chicago region.

Because democracy is especially accessible in municipal government, citizens' concerns for environmental sustainability and community resilience are influential. Municipal sustainability commissions are often the catalyst for village board or city council action to formally adopt the Greenest Region Compact and other commitments. Commissions frequently spark the creation of a municipal sustainability plan and do important outreach and education to garner support and participation from members of the community.

Local governments are also celebrated as the level of government that gets things done. Local elections are typically non-partisan, which allows for more focus on problem-solving than politics. The services local governments provide directly impact residents' daily lives, like safe roads, streetlights, sidewalks, drinking water, law enforcement, fire protection, street trees, and community development. Services that many municipal governments often provide create a sense of community and improve the well-being of their residents. These services include social services, community events and entertainment, civic engagement and sustainability. However, sustainability can be handily integrated into the delivery of core services like efficient water utilities; smart, energy-efficient streetlights; and complete streets policies that encourage active transportation. These kinds of pragmatic sustainability strategies underpin the Greenest Region Compact, discussed below.

The Metropolitan Mayors Caucus

Illinois is notable for having the most units of local government of any state – 8,529 independent taxing bodies. Of these, 1,295 are municipalities, meaning that there is opportunity for fragmentation of service delivery and overlapping jurisdictions. In northeastern Illinois, former Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley saw the potential for economic development for the entire region by fostering unity among Chicago and its suburban neighbors and thus led the formation of the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus (Caucus) in 1997. The Caucus is a non-profit regional council of governments whose membership includes 275 municipalities and nine sub-regional councils of governments. The Caucus' Executive Board is comprised of mayors representing each of these sub-regions and Chicago. Together they advocate for strong and effective municipal government and supportive policies that advance regional priorities. The Caucus focuses on housing, transportation, and environmental sustainability by researching and recommending policies, securing grants and valuable partnerships, and creating tools for coordinated local action.

Getting Sustainability Done

The foundational tool for municipal sustainability, both at the regional level and local level in metropolitan Chicago, is the Greenest Region Compact. As Mayor of Chicago, Richard M. Daley declared he wanted Chicago to be the greenest city in America. The Caucus met this challenge with the original Greenest Region Compact in 2007, which encouraged municipalities to set environmental goals and undertake at least three basic actions to conserve water and energy and manage electronic waste.

As knowledge and opportunities for municipalities to take even more sophisticated sustainability action grew, so did public support. However, national and global programs to support municipal leadership on sustainability, like C40 Cities and American Cities Climate Challenge, have been designed for and limited to participation by the largest cities, like Chicago. The Urban Sustainability Directors Network, a professional association, restricts its membership to municipal staff fully dedicated to sustainability, which few small municipalities have. Only a handful of suburban Chicago municipalities have the capacity to meet the staffing, tasks, and resource requirements of the Urban Sustainability Directors Network or the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. This gap left the diverse municipalities of the Chicago region lacking external guidance and support for focused, impactful sustainability work.

The Greenest Region Compact

In 2014, the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus took on a strategic update to the original Greenest Region Compact (2007), aiming to make the compact more comprehensive, impactful and inclusive. The Greenest Region Compact "2" was constructed by synthesizing all 30 of the existing sustainability plans adopted by municipalities in the region. This still left out municipalities that had not yet created a sustainability plan but were taking sustainable actions. These actions, like hosting a community farmer's market to improve access to local food, earning the Tree City USA designation by demonstrating urban forest stewardship, or managing drinking water resources by effectively metering customer water consumption, were being

taken by communities across the region. Most municipal leaders hadn't seen this pragmatic work as "sustainability" but instead as the fundamental work of local governments. The update to the [Greenest Region Compact](#) (GRC) integrated 93 sensible, familiar measures of municipal sustainability along with the forward-thinking goals articulated in the existing municipal sustainability plans at the time.



(image 1, GRC logo)

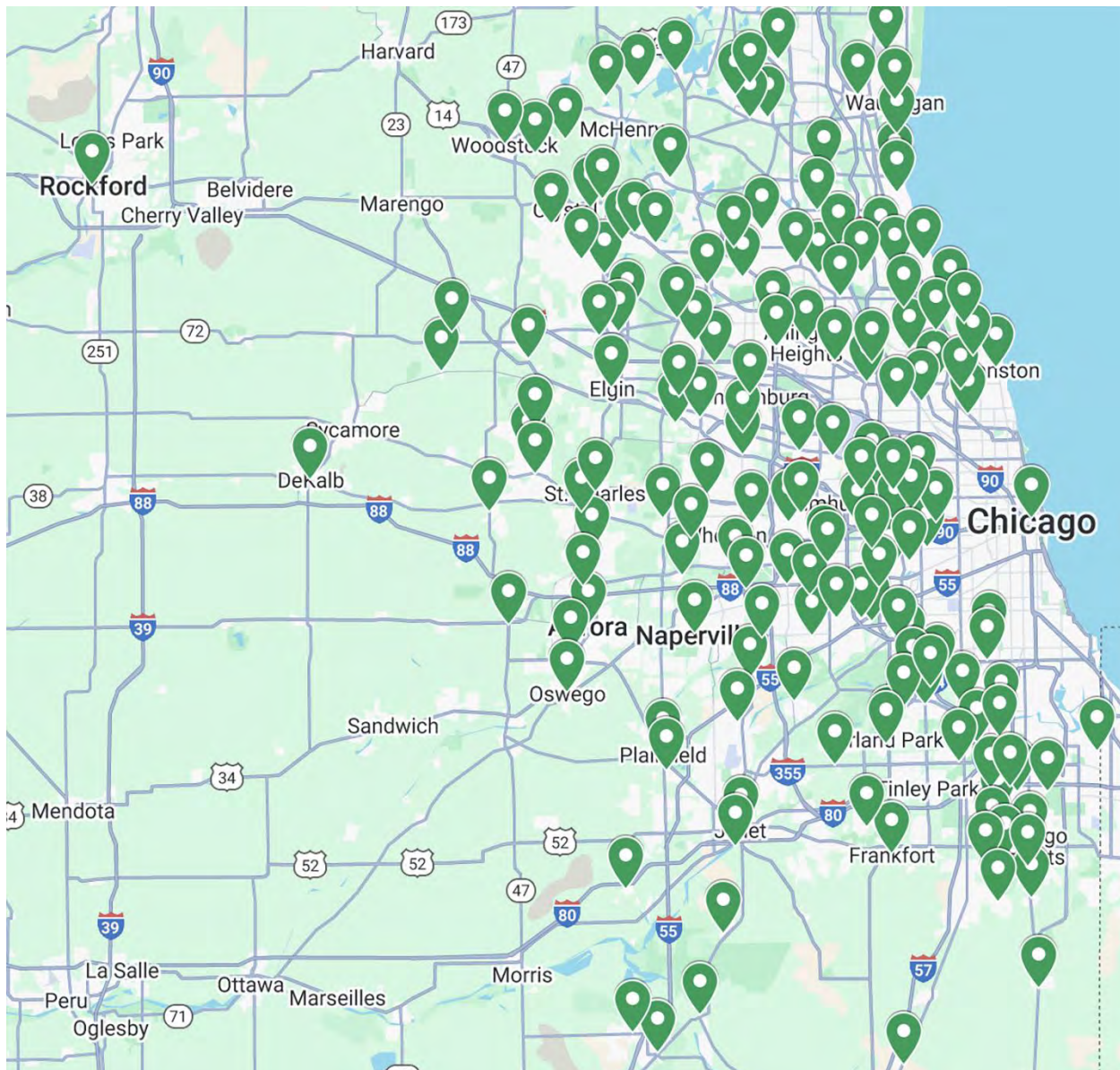
The result was an accessible, sensible and strategic GRC program designed to drive effective sustainability both at the municipal level and at a coordinated regional level. To best gain participation and facilitate action, the Greenest Region Compact was created in three parts:

- The Greenest Region Compact- the concise political pledge;
- The GRC Framework – the tool to enable municipal assessment and planning; and
- Collaborative action to achieve GRC goals.

First, the Greenest Region Compact pledge offers a set of 49 consensus sustainability goals in 10 categories (Climate, Economic Development, Energy, Land, Leadership, Mobility, Municipal Operations, Sustainable Communities, Waste, and Water, Municipalities are invited to formally adopt these consensus goals through a village board or city council resolution.

There is no cost to adopt the GRC, and there is no performance or reporting requirement. The concise goals, uniquely tailored to the strengths and authorities of municipal government, fit on just two pages. The Compact offers all municipalities the opportunity to participate in a well-vetted, practical sustainability program and demonstrate their commitment publicly.

The GRC is accessible to communities of all sizes and strengths. To date, 159 municipalities, six counties and all subregional councils of governments have adopted the goals of the Greenest Region Compact. This is the largest regional sustainability coalition of municipalities in the United States, representing 8.1 million residents.



(image 2, GRC map)

Second, the Greenest Region Compact Framework offers a simple tool for municipalities to assess their progress on sustainability and develop their own tailored sustainability plan based on the GRC goals. The Framework presents hundreds of strategies and objectives to achieve GRC goals. This tool allows municipal staff and citizen commissioners to put the GRC pledge into action and prioritize strategies best suited to their needs to yield the greatest positive impact.

Finally, the Caucus leads collaborative action to achieve the goals of the GRC. Aligning all initiatives with the goals of the GRC, the Caucus supports GRC communities by securing grants and partnerships, working with cohorts of communities, and convening monthly Environment and Energy Committee meetings to share knowledge and guide collaborative efforts. These

innovative, collaborative programs best leverage the power of the GRC collaborative and the strengths of the Caucus. Examples of these collaborative successes are discussed below.



(image 3, Environment and Energy Committee tours the green roof on Illinois' first municipal net zero building)

The Climate Crisis and Local Government Response

When the United States announced it would withdraw from the global Paris Climate Accord in 2017, confidence in the federal government's willingness and ability to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change was irreparably shaken. Local governments and the constituents they serve had come to count on the federal government to shoulder the burden of planning for a sustainable economy and implementing powerful policies to curb greenhouse gas emissions. However slowly and haltingly the movement, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Energy and research agencies were indeed moving to meet the global imperative of climate action before this sudden reversal of national policy.

A broad coalition of business leaders, governors, mayors and other civic leaders coalesced around the We Are Still In movement that challenges all subnational governments and private institutions to take decisive, meaningful climate action, regardless of the failings of the federal government. In the Chicago metropolitan region, the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus answered

the challenge by activating its diverse membership of municipalities to focus, unite, and step up to address the urgent need for climate action.

Greenest Region Compact communities were comfortable with their role in sustainability before these events, but less comfortable with their role in mitigating climate change and in building resilience to impacts of climate change. While the GRC leveraged municipal strengths to broadly achieve sustainability goals, the urgency of the climate crisis called for a more sharply focused unified effort to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

Climate Action Plan for the Chicago Region

The increasingly powerful GRC collaborative could be activated to tackle climate change with support and guidance. With international non-governmental organizations like C40 still focused on helping larger, high-capacity cities plan for climate change, the Caucus proposed a regional climate action plan that would identify the most impactful strategies that could be enacted by any municipal government. The Caucus' proposal converged with an emergent program being championed by the European Union in partnership with the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM) to pioneer regional climate planning in the United States. Europe has been successfully undertaking regional climate planning and coordinated climate action. In the new Regional and Metro Scale Climate Leaders initiative, these European regional climate collaboratives would mentor U.S. regions, and GCoM would provide expertise and supportive convenings. In 2019, the Caucus was selected to participate in this regional climate planning program along with the Kansas City and Metropolitan Washington regions.



(image 4, Regional stakeholders participate in climate action planning in Chicago)

With just 16 months to complete a transformative regional climate action plan and with no additional funding support, the challenging task was exacerbated by the global pandemic. The plan was to include a greenhouse gas inventory (GHG), mitigation strategies, a climate risk and

vulnerability assessment, adaptation strategies, and it was to set science-based targets for mitigation and adaptation. While the GRC had many sustainability strategies that were effective GHG mitigation measures, the Caucus had no experience with adaptation planning. The concept of climate adaptation was similarly unfamiliar to municipalities in the Chicago region, though in fact, municipalities are practicing adaptation. Serendipity brought needed adaptation expertise to the regional climate planning endeavor in the Chicago region. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) had just launched its U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit and Steps to Resilience and was eager for cities to put the tools to work. The prospect of planning resilience for a region of 275 municipalities stretched the intended audience for the Toolkit considerably, but NOAA staff graciously accepted the challenge and generously supported the Caucus' climate adaptation plan with staff expertise and professional talent.



(image 5, Climate Action Plan for the Chicago Region cover)

The resulting Climate Action Plan for the Chicago Region (CAP) successfully engaged 270 stakeholders and 50 contributors to develop a comprehensive and strategic climate action plan that would meet targets of 80% GHG reduction and equitable, persistent climate adaptation by 2050. This was the first CAP for the Chicago region and the largest regional climate plan in the United States. The pioneering plan was honored with five awards, including national recognition from the American Planning Association and a Climate Leadership Award from the Climate Registry and the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions (C2ES). The Caucus offered a companion resolution to its member municipalities, and 38 local city councils and village boards took this action to endorse the goals of the CAP.



(image 6, Environment & Energy Committee tours Climate Action Museum in Chicago)

Defining municipal modes of action

The Caucus chose to organize the complex mitigation strategies of the Climate Action Plan for the Chicago Region around the three key levers of municipal power: Lead, Encourage and Enact. These three modes of action, borrowed from the climate plan of the Kansas City region, clarified that all municipalities had the power to take climate action with their own unique strengths and authorities. These are:



LEAD



ENCOURAGE



ENACT

(images 7-9, lead, encourage, enact icons)

Lead

Municipal leaders can make decisions about their own operations that will reduce their GHG emissions. In recent years, 65% of Caucus members have collectively reduced CO₂ emissions by 38,000 tons of CO₂ through energy efficiency retrofits of their municipal facilities and buildings.

Encourage

Municipal leaders have the unique ability to encourage their residents, businesses and institutions to join in taking meaningful climate action. For example, 45 Caucus member mayors have signed onto the National Wildlife Federation's Mayors Monarch Pledge to take a variety of steps to improve habitat for the threatened monarch butterfly in their community. These steps include hosting sales and giveaways of native milkweed plants, encouraging homeowners' associations and other institutions to manage their lands for monarch habitat, and partnering to educate the community about monarchs and supportive land stewardship. The Field Museum [studied](#) gardens containing milkweed plants in the Chicago region in 2024 and found that these small urban and suburban habitat patches, in aggregate, are vital to sustaining monarch butterfly populations. Illinois is the state with the highest number of Mayors Monarch Pledge signatories in 2025. Municipalities are not typically large landowners, but their ability to encourage others could meaningfully support monarch conservation and build resilient landscapes.

Enact

Enacting codes and policies supportive of climate mitigation and adaptation is likely the most obvious role of local governments. Local governments have the authority to guide land development for long-term sustainability, adopt policies to advance clean energy, promote sustainable transportation, and optimize building energy performance. Complete Streets policies that guide the design and construction of roadways for all users, not just automobiles, are a good example of local policies reducing emissions from transportation. In the Chicago region, 101 municipalities and counties have adopted Complete Streets policies that support active transportation and improve safety, health, economic, and environmental outcomes.

Advancing clean energy

Through the GRC and the CAP and with strong leadership, the Caucus has effectively advanced renewable energy and energy efficiency in the region. The Caucus has achieved success with programs such as SolSmart, Community Solar Clearinghouse Solutions Program (CS²), EV Readiness Program, and numerous low-income energy efficiency programs. These programs align with both GRC and CAP goals, but their implementation has been more opportunistic than data driven. Programs were implemented when other approaches failed and when funding and assistance were available. Their success underscores the ingenuity of the Caucus and their municipal members to overcome barriers and leverage their unique strengths and authorities to “lead, encourage, and enact” for sustainability.

SolSmart

The first notable success for the GRC collaborative was earning the top spot among states for the number of SolSmart designated local governments. SolSmart is a U.S. Department of Energy-supported program that helps local governments streamline codes, policies and take other actions to advance rooftop solar photovoltaic (PV) deployment. SolSmart offers municipalities technical assistance and a strategic checklist of tasks to improve permitting processes, update zoning codes, train staff on PV technology and improve community access to solar energy information and services. Local governments can achieve designation as a SolSmart community at the Bronze, Silver, or Gold level for this work. Sixty-one Illinois municipalities, the majority of which are guided by the GRC, have earned SolSmart, accounting for 10.7% of the nation’s 570 SolSmart designated communities.

The SolSmart program neatly aligns with the GRC and the role of municipalities to “encourage and enact” to drive solar development. Prior attempts by the Caucus to help municipalities “lead” by installing PV systems on their own facilities failed because of utility franchise fee policies. In the Chicago region, municipalities receive free “unbilled” electricity for most public facilities, unless the facility generates revenue, as a water pumping station or municipal parking lot would. Without an electricity bill for village or city hall, no cost savings from switching to on-site solar could be realized, and financing municipally hosted PV proved impossible. However, municipalities have the unique authority to permit solar development and the responsibility to guide sustainable development through zoning codes. The Caucus worked with GRC communities in three cohorts, leading them to address the GRC goal of “advancing clean energy” while achieving SolSmart designation. This cohort approach also earned the Caucus national recognition from the Interstate Renewable Energy Council and The Solar Foundation. SolSmart also proved beneficial for sustainable community development as investment in solar development accelerated. For example, the Village of Schaumburg earned SolSmart Silver and has seen an increase of 21,533% in residential solar permits in seven years.



(image 10, Twenty-one municipalities and counties are recognized for earning the SolSmart designation at Argonne National Laboratory in Lemont, Illinois)

EV Readiness Program

The success of SolSmart sparked the creation of the EV Readiness Program that also leverages “lead, encourage and enact” strengths of local governments, this time to accelerate transportation electrification. To design the EV Readiness Program, the Caucus embarked on a robust planning process over 18 months to learn what it meant for a local government to become “EV Ready” and to design a supportive program. The Caucus team convened an EV Ready Advisory Committee of more than 70 experts and stakeholders and conducted 17 listening sessions to design the EV Readiness Checklist and the corresponding recognition levels of Bronze, Silver and Gold EV Ready Community. The Caucus also chose a cohort-based approach to lead GRC communities through the EV Readiness Checklist and eventually designation as EV Ready Communities.

The launch of the EV Readiness Program converged with launch of ComEd’s Beneficial Electrification Plan and laid groundwork for a productive partnership between the Caucus and the electric utility. With ComEd financial support, the Caucus and its team of consultants have led three cohorts totaling 36 municipalities and two counties to earn EV Ready Community designation. A fourth cohort will finish in mid-2026. The Caucus convenes the EV Readiness cohort bi-weekly to share knowledge about EV technology, barriers and opportunities for transportation electrification and to work collaboratively on zoning codes amendments, as well as safe and code-compliant permits for EV charging systems. The Caucus offers in-person training for first responders to learn about and practice techniques for managing incidents involving EVs and charging stations, and more. These EV Readiness tasks leverage the municipal authority to “enact” policies that mitigate GHG emissions.



Image 11, First responders learn techniques for managing incidents involving electric vehicles as part of the EV Readiness Program, in Park Forest, Illinois

Like the municipal role in solar development, local governments are limited in their ability to “lead” by adopting EV technology for their own operations, as municipal fleets are challenging to electrify. Unlike commercial delivery fleets, which are strong candidates for electrification, small municipal fleets are diverse and must be responsive to emergency situations and sustained use. Further, municipal vehicles typically travel within municipal boundaries, accruing low mileage and thus limiting favorable fuel cost savings. However, ComEd supports EV Ready Community candidates with no-cost Fleet Electrification Assessments that analyze vehicle use, market availability, mileage and electrical infrastructure to guide local governments in making smart investments for their fleets. EV Ready candidate communities earn points towards designation for completing the fleet assessments and more points for procuring EVs.

The EV Readiness Program also leverages the municipal role to “encourage” EV adoption among its constituents by sharing information about municipal EV policies, access to public charging, available grants and incentives for EVs and EV charging systems and more. EV Ready Communities establish their own EV landing page and share EV information through newsletters and social media. Illinois Governor JB Pritzker set a state goal of 1,000,000 new EVs on the road by 2030, but the state is lagging with only 150,000 EVs registered in Illinois as of 2025. Though federal tax incentives for EV purchases and EV manufacturing ended in the fall of 2025 and the

rate of EV adoption has slowed, constituents in EV Ready Communities purchase EVs at a rate higher than the state adoption rate.

It takes about a year to earn EV Ready Community designation, after which the communities are lauded with a high-energy awards ceremony and celebration. After earning EV Ready Bronze or Silver, some local governments return to work with the next cohort to achieve a higher level of designation. There are four EV Ready Gold Communities – Chicago, Oak Park, Rolling Meadows and River Forest. Most of the remaining EV Ready Communities have achieved the Bronze level.

In 2025, the third and largest cohort of 17 EV Ready Communities were celebrated at an award ceremony at Illinois Tech campus in Chicago. One hundred people gathered to celebrate the achievements of the mayors and local public officials, including the CEO of ComEd, U.S. Senator Dick Durbin, Illinois Tech officials, members of the Illinois Commerce Commission and a dozen sponsors from the EV industry. The event received news coverage on five network television and radio stations, stories in six local newspapers, and two trade publications. EV Ready Communities, eager to show their progress in fleet electrification, contributed to a display of electric vehicles, including the first electric street sweeper in the region, an electric refuse hauler, and an assortment of municipal electric fleet vehicles. As local officials become engaged in clean energy policy, their thirst for knowledge about clean energy technology grows. About 80 ceremony guests concluded the celebration with a tour of Illinois Tech's microgrid and the Robert W. Galvin Center, where they learned about electricity innovation and resilience.



Image 12, The largest cohort of communities are recognized for earning the EV Ready Community designation at a celebration at Illinois Tech, Chicago, Illinois

The highly collaborative and successful EV Readiness Program supports the CAP's Decarbonize Transportation goal and the associated emissions reduction target of 9.8 MMT CO₂e by 2030. The program has brought positive recognition to the participating 36 municipalities and two counties. The national Charging Smart program paralleled the EV Readiness Program before the

U.S. Department of Energy terminated the program in October 2025. Charging Smart has only 46 designated communities outside of the Chicago region. The EV Readiness Program also helped EV Ready Communities earn \$17.5 million in grants and incentives for EVs, electric and hybrid buses, and EV charging infrastructure. The Caucus was awarded a federal Charging and Fueling Infrastructure Grant of \$14.5 million to install charging infrastructure at 96 sites in 34 EV Ready Communities, but the federal government cancelled the grant, and no funds have been received. The EV Readiness Program was selected as a Top 100 Finalist in the 2025 Chicago Innovation Awards and earned recognition from the Illinois Association of Municipal Management Assistants.

Community Solar Clearinghouse Solutions (CS²)

Another successful Caucus program to enable local governments to accelerate solar energy adoption is the Community Solar Clearinghouse Solutions (CS²) Program. Illinois' Climate and Equitable Jobs Act encourages the development of community solar in Illinois, allowing customers to access clean energy from small-scale (2 MW) installations at cost savings over grid-supplied electricity. However, marketing policies and regulations by the Illinois Power Agency make purchasing a community solar subscription by residential customers confusing and complex. GRC Communities work to achieve the GRC goal of "engaging the community in clean energy" and the CAP goal of Decarbonizing Energy Sources by helping their residents access fair and transparent community solar subscriptions through the CS² Program. With Caucus support, participating communities negotiate with Illinois community solar developers to assure savings and favorable subscription terms for their residents and communicate the opportunity to their residents. Exercising their role to "encourage" others to take climate action, 24 municipalities participate in CS², which has enrolled 1,744 households for 11,096 kw of new, local community solar. The CS² Program was recognized with two Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar by the U.S. Department of Energy in 2023.

Reducing Household Energy Burden Through Efficiency

Municipal governments have reliable and trusted methods for communicating information to their constituents. They frequently work to connect their vulnerable residents to programs and services that can improve residents' well-being and reduce costs. While municipalities are not directly involved in household energy use, their strengths as constituent connector and communicator prove valuable in reducing household energy burden, especially in low-income communities.

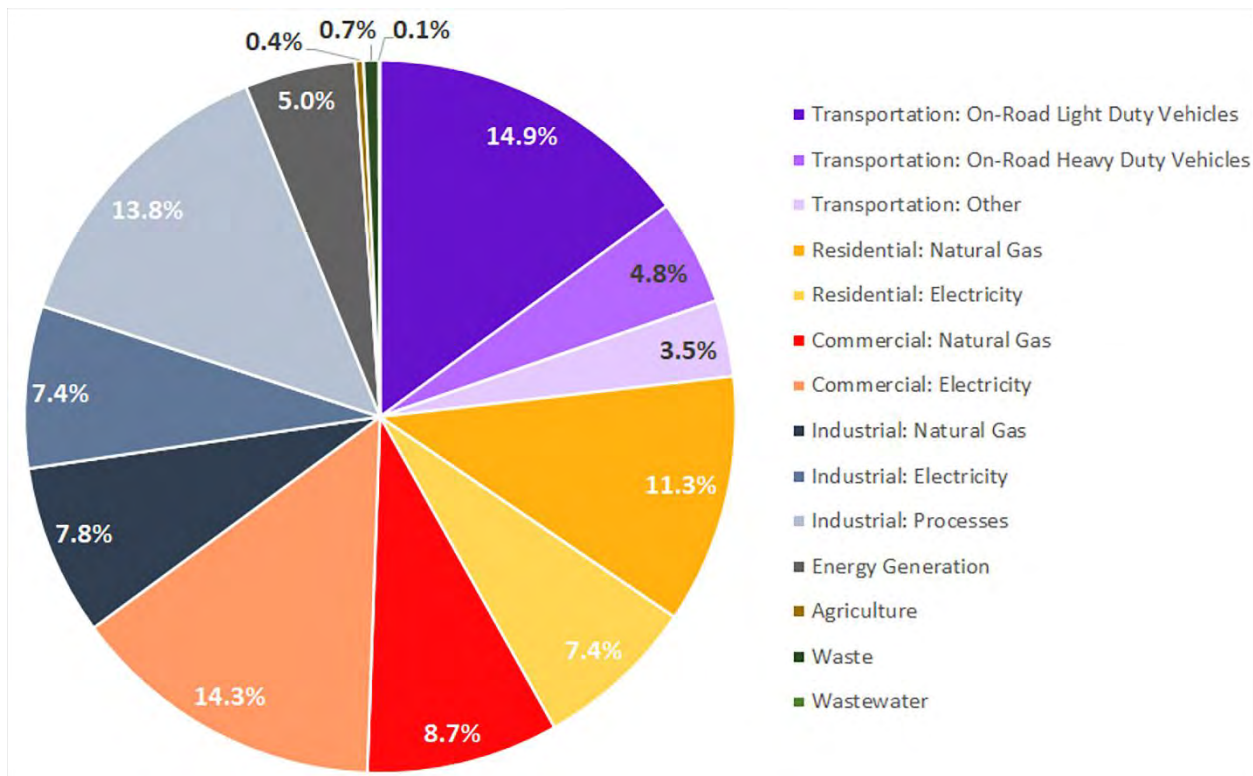


Image 13, 2019 greenhouse gas inventory for the Chicago metropolitan statistical area

The CAP demonstrated that residential energy use was the second highest source of GHG emissions in the building sector and accounts for 18.7% of total emissions from both gas and electricity consumption (2019 regional GHG inventory). At the same time, energy efficiency technologies are readily available and well-supported by state-mandated utility energy efficiency programs. In Illinois, there is focused interest in energy efficiency programs to benefit low-income households, which bear a disproportionate burden for energy costs.

The Caucus advocated for municipal involvement in low-income energy efficiency programs by leveraging their communication and engagement strengths to “encourage” energy efficiency. With various partnerships, grants and contracts, the Caucus has empowered municipal governments to be effective agents for boosting residential energy efficiency.

With funding support from the former Illinois Science and Energy Innovation Foundation, the Caucus conducted research and developed strategies for local government officials and citizen commissions to educate and engage their residents about energy efficiency. In partnership with a utility implementation contractor, the Caucus now works with 33 low-income municipalities in the region to encourage residential participation in the Home Energy Savings Program. The program provides home energy assessments and generous incentives for energy efficiency retrofit services for income-qualified utility customers. In 2026, the Caucus will expand its outreach and engagement to help low-income households access Whole Home Electrification benefits offered by ComEd.

(Insert energy efficiency outreach 300 dpi photo)

Late in 2025, the Caucus launched the Low-Income Energy Efficiency Outreach and Engagement grant program, which is providing \$756,000 to local governments and community-based organizations to “encourage” low-income households to participate in various energy assistance, energy efficiency, and renewable energy programs. The next phase of the program is to activate an advisory committee to collaborate with utilities and partners to strengthen low-income energy efficiency in the ComEd territory in northeastern Illinois.

This focus on residential energy efficiency aligns with GRC energy objectives and with the CAP goal of Optimizing Building Energy and the associated GHG emissions target of 8.5 MMT CO₂e by 2030.

Outcomes and Outlook

Adopting and Adapting the GRC

Since its launch in 2016, the Greenest Region Compact has been highly effective in engaging municipalities of all sizes and strengths across the Chicago region in sustainability. The smallest municipality to adopt the GRC is Burlington, Illinois, with a population of 526. Chicago is the largest GRC community with a population of 2.7 million residents. The GRC is endorsed by 165 municipalities and counties serving an estimated 8.1 million residents. It is the largest municipal sustainability collaborative in the United States

While originally designed for municipalities, the GRC was adapted for counties. In 2019, Kane County became the first to adopt the GRC and was followed in subsequent years by five of the seven counties in the Chicago metropolitan region. The practical GRC Framework was also the model for the National Recreation and Park Association, which adapted it to suit the unique needs of park districts and agencies to create its own Environmentally Sustainable Parks Assessment tool in 2025.

The unifying nature of the GRC has further allowed the Chicago region to excel in municipal sustainability through exemplary performance in the SolSmart, EV Readiness and CS² programs. The GRC also enabled regional climate action planning through the Regional and Metro Scale Climate Leaders program and subsequently as the Caucus became the lead organization for the U.S. EPA’s Climate Pollution Reduction Grant program, which supports the Comprehensive Climate Action Plan for the Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area.

The GRC and the Caucus’s collaborative programs have also built capacity within municipal governments to achieve GRC goals. Municipal bodies initially deliberate about adopting GRC consensus goals and then are ready for actions to support those goals as programs and opportunities arise. The SolSmart program was the first to demonstrate the powerful link between the GRC objectives and the objectives of the SolSmart program, thus enabling our region’s robust participation and success.

When the GRC was launched in 2016, only four Caucus member municipalities had dedicated sustainability staff. To fill this capacity gap, the Caucus created the Greenest Region Corps (GRCorps) program to provide short-term sustainability staffing through the federal AmeriCorps. Thirty GRCorps members served 18 host communities to help them achieve GRC goals. The program ended after three years, but a few municipalities, like Northbrook, Waukegan, and Hawthorn Woods, created full-time sustainability staff positions and employed former GRCorps members. While many factors likely contribute to the growth in sustainability staffing, 36 GRC communities now report having dedicated sustainability staff.



Image 14, Greenest Region Corps members in Chicago

As intended, the GRC Framework has been used to create sustainability plans in at least 26 communities. These plans are tailored for municipal implementation but perfectly aligned with the consensus goals of the GRC, making them potentially more powerful than independently crafted plans.

Tracking and reporting

The three parts of the Greenest Region Compact – the Compact, Framework, and collaborative implementation programs – have served municipalities well, but there is no organized tracking or reporting of outcomes. Tracking progress towards GRC goals is done ad hoc by GRC communities. Greenest Region Corps members tracked impressive accomplishments of 820 GRC objectives in their 18 host communities over the program's three years. The Caucus collects performance metrics for its collaborative programs, like the number of electric vehicles registered in EV Ready Communities or the *kw* capacity of community solar projects supported by the CS² Program. But comprehensive, organized tracking of accomplishments and outcomes relative to GRC goals is not yet being done either locally or regionally.

The Caucus has researched and planned to create a tracking and reporting system for the GRC and aims to fully develop the system in the coming year. The system will provide a tailored dashboard for each GRC Community to measure progress and report to their constituents. The

system will also aggregate and analyze metrics and outcomes across all GRC communities to track progress towards Climate Action Plan targets and share results with supporters and funders. Sustainable Jersey, the largest state sustainability network for municipalities, developed a web-based platform to track and report outcomes of municipal participation in their program, which serves as a model for other states and possibly for the Greenest Region Compact.

GRC Communities have expressed strong interest in tracking and reporting, but are also concerned that the reporting process be easy. Local governments are best focused on achieving GRC goals and should be supported in expeditious reporting of results. The Caucus is anxious to report regional progress towards climate mitigation and adaptation.

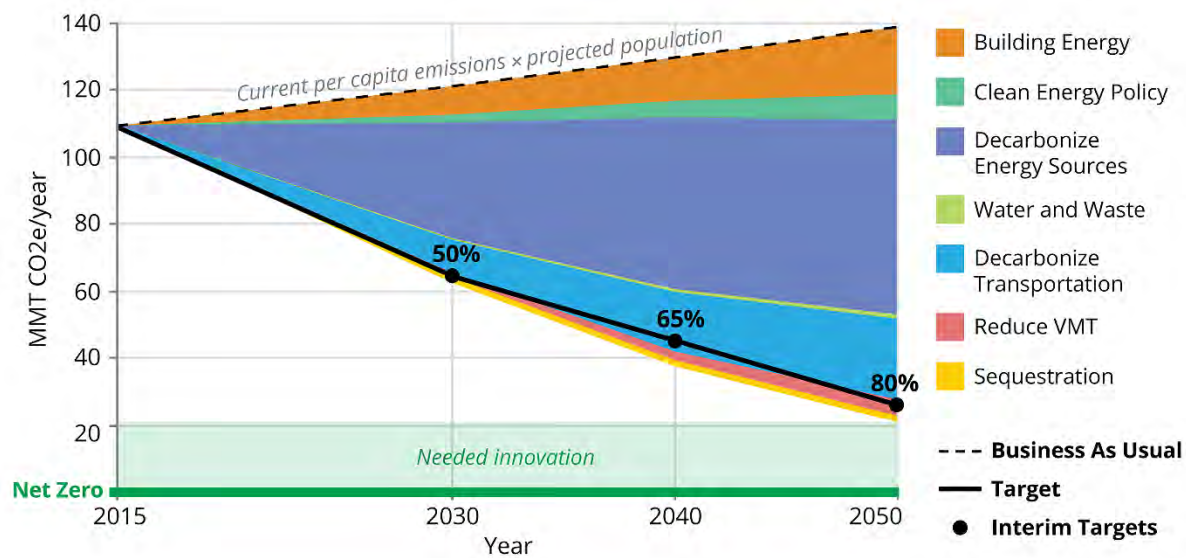


Image 15, Climate Action Plan for the Chicago Region (2021) Mitigation Wedge

Outlook

The successful adoption of the GRC by 60% of Caucus member municipalities has nearly saturated the potential audience of the region. Adoption of the GRC still occurs regularly, but at a much slower pace than in previous years. The GRC is more popular and accessible than the CAP, though it must be updated to integrate with the more recent CAP and to reflect changes in policies, programs and priorities since its creation.

Author biography

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Metropolitan Mayors Caucus

Edith Makra directs sustainability initiatives for the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, a coalition of 275 mayors in the greater Chicago region. Makra developed the Greenest Region Compact, a

consensus sustainability pledge now adopted by 165 Chicago-area communities, forming the largest regional municipal sustainability collaborative in the US. She has a B.S. in Forestry from the University of Illinois; an Executive Sustainability Certificate from Harvard University; and is an International Society of Sustainability Professionals –Sustainability Excellence Professional; and is a Climate Change Professional, Certified by the Association of Climate Change Officers.

For further reading

About the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, Metropolitan Mayors Caucus website accessed January 2026, <https://mayorscaucus.org/about-us/>

The **Greenest Region Compact**, Metropolitan Mayors Caucus website accessed January 2026, <https://mayorscaucus.org/initiatives/environment/rec/>

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