

## Most Cities Well Off the Pace to Meet Needed Clean Energy Goals

**T**HE American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy recently released its annual City Clean Energy Scorecard, which ranks 100 large and mid-sized U.S. cities on their “efforts to advance clean energy goals through energy efficiency and cleaner fuels and electric grids.” While the ratings are attention-grabbers, the takeaways are also noteworthy.

It’s no surprise that the top scorers are predominantly large coastal cities—San Francisco, Seattle, Washington, Boston, and New York as well as Minneapolis. It is a bit jarring, however, that only 19 cities appear to be on track to meet their near-term greenhouse gas reduction targets based on available data—and 37 of the 100 largest cities have not even set targets.

The recent scorecard is not the first indication that cities are struggling to reach their goals. ACEEE’s 2020 report found that only about a third of the cities that had set goals were on track to achieve them. Similarly, a 2020 Brookings study concluded that “about two-thirds of cities are currently lagging their targeted emission levels.” The 2022 scorecard not only confirms limited progress but also indicates that cities are failing to accelerate their clean energy initiatives to get on track to meet their goals.

Nevertheless, the newest report identifies 177 actions taken by cities to advance clean energy between May 2020 and July 2021, despite a Covid-related dip in activity in early 2020. The scorecard evaluates five policy areas—community-wide initiatives, building policies, transportation policies, energy and water utilities, and local government operations. The most popular measures include “creation and adoption of a clean energy plan, partnership, goal, or government procedure” (adopted by 38 percent of the

100 cities), efforts to “improve energy efficiency during design, siting, construction, renovation, and operation of buildings” (34 percent) and development of clean energy infrastructure” (28 percent).

The report flags as problematic, however, the dearth of transportation-related actions, given the sector’s outsized footprint. Lead author Stefen Samarripas explains: “Most cities haven’t set a goal for reducing vehicle travel or transportation emissions, and of those that have, only a few show progress, so that points to a big area for improvement.”

ACEEE identifies key strategies that cities should take to advance clean energy. First on its list is “leading with a commitment to racial and social equity” by, for example, pursuing efforts to reduce energy use and costs in affordable housing.

The report also recommends adopting mandatory policies for bolstering the energy performance of existing buildings, such as requirements for benchmarking and transparency. It recommends setting future goals for community-wide

reductions, as well as transportation-specific clean energy goals.

Kendra Abkowitz, Nashville’s chief sustainability and resilience officer, says the opportunity areas ACEEE highlights “align well with what we are seeing on the ground and plan to tackle in Nashville.” The city has a robust clean energy agenda, according to Abkowitz: “On the transportation front, we are highly focused on leveraging federal, state, and local dollars to increase use of alternative fuels, electricity in particular, and built infrastructure capable of supporting public and private sector fleet and residential transitions to EVs.” She also notes the mayor’s plans to introduce a city council resolution



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“to formally adopt a greenhouse gas emissions reduction target for municipal and community operations and develop an energy benchmarking program for the city’s large commercial buildings.” (The author serves as co-chair of the Nashville Mayor’s Sustainability Advisory Committee.)

The report recognizes, however, that even the best-laid plans can be waylaid—or bolstered—by outside actors, such as investor-owned utilities, transit authorities, and state governments. For example, a city may be subject to a state-wide building energy code. The scorecard nevertheless considers these outside actors’ actions in developing scores, reasoning in part that cities “can still advocate for them to adopt certain policies and programs and can further engage in their design and implementation.”

The extent that cities can influence outside actors will vary considerably, of course, and challenges are likely greater for blue cities in red states. But Abkowitz, whose city jumped 12 spots in the recent rankings, advises that “recognizing the benefits and co-benefits” associated with the measures needed to reach carbon reduction targets “can be a real win-win and one way to work around potential barriers.” She also exhorts cities to “leverage partnerships,” explaining that “it is a tall mountain to climb alone. And leveraging private sector and community partnerships and the financial, technical, and other resources they can bring to bear will help achieve goals better and faster.”

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