

3 Case Studies

3.1 Kansas City Region: Creating a Template of Equitable Action Deployed Throughout a Region



Figure 6: Planning area

In 2018, two Kansas City area elected officials, Mike Kelly and Lindsey Constance, were concerned for the future of their young children and decided to form a group to address climate change and its impacts. This group, Climate Action KC, would grow to become a coalition of over 100 officials from 10 levels of elected office. The group wanted to develop a plan that could guide local governments in the area in combatting the causes of climate change while also improving resilience to the effects of climate change already affecting the region. They turned to the planning experts at the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) to partner in developing a regional plan.

A nonprofit association of city and county governments, MARC is the regional and Metropolitan Planning Organization for the bistate Kansas City region, which spans both Missouri and Kansas (see Figure 6). Governed by a Board of Directors made

up of 33 local elected officials, MARC serves nine counties and 119 cities, providing a forum for the region to work together to advance social, economic and environmental progress. In 2019, the MARC Board of Directors voted to join the Global Covenant of Mayors on behalf of the cities in their region. This allowed MARC to apply for technical support for regional climate action planning.

MARC and Climate Action KC partnered first on a Climate Action Playbook in 2019 then developed a more comprehensive Kansas City Regional Climate Action Plan in 2021. The plan focuses on both mitigation (reduction of greenhouse gas emissions) and adaptation (preventing or minimizing damage from climate change effects). Since then, 20 local governments have formally embraced the regional climate plan, and now MARC is actively working on the plan's implementation across various fronts.

How the plan was developed

Challenging as it is to develop a resilience plan for a single community, MARC was attempting to develop one that could be applicable throughout an entire region. Realizing the diverse needs of their communities, MARC's first goal was to involve as many people as possible so that the ultimate plan would reflect the region's many different needs and interests. The planning effort started with the formation of an advisory committee comprising a wide range of local government professionals who had worked on climate issues – many of which had been involved with the Climate Action Playbook. But MARC staff quickly found that a single group wasn't enough to

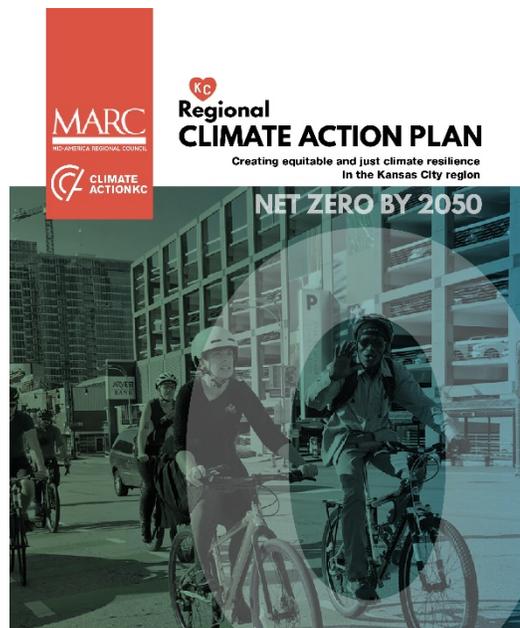


Figure 7: Cover of the KC Regional Climate Action Plan

meaningfully engage the range of people and issues involved, so the committee structure evolved into multiple bodies, covering five sectors:

1. Building & Energy
2. Green Infrastructure & Food Systems
3. Transportation & Land Use
4. Solid Waste
5. Innovation & Finance

These committees sought input from dozens of people representing governments, nonprofits and the communities themselves. The team used [MySidewalk's MindMixer tool](#), a website to facilitate online collection of ideas for projects, policies and strategies across various sectors. They then collected all the information from this tool and distributed it to the technical working groups. Karen Clawson, Principal Planner and Program Manager at MARC, provided some insight into their process:

"We wanted to include as many people as possible, which posed a challenge. Many wanted to participate, but we lacked the right structure. So, we formed committees to fold in more individuals and maintain a sector-specific approach to make progress. The committees played a crucial role in ensuring that at every stage of our process, we prioritized equity and ensured the right people were involved. We tried to engage both interested individuals and experts."

Managing that much feedback from that many sources could have made the effort unmanageable. A critical early step to keep efforts focused was to develop the guiding principles below that were approved by the steering committee and shared with all participants:

1. So much of what we need to do, we want to do. Climate solutions build stronger, healthier, and more vibrant communities.
2. Resilience builds on previous investments, from trees to transit.
3. Leadership comes from all of us.
4. Resilience focuses on solutions that address mitigation and adaptation at the same time.
5. Solutions must match the scale of the problem, and there is much that we can do to make a big difference.
6. Do no harm. Doing nothing is harmful. Doing a lot is possible.
7. Resilience creates economic vitality and environmental health, with an unblinking social equity lens and a commitment to public health.
8. Complex linkages among sectors and disciplines require an integrated, systems-based and collaborative approach.

Tom Jacobs, MARC's Chief Resilience Officer, called out the principle he felt was most critical in their effort:

"The concept of scale was of great importance to us. We wanted to give people the sense that every small contribution matters and contributes to scalable solutions. For climate change, our guiding principles emphasized, 'Do no harm. Doing nothing is harmful. Doing a lot is possible.'"

Once the five sector working groups had collected, sorted and achieved consensus around which ideas should be included in the plan, those ideas were shared in another round of public engagement. The

steering committee then incorporated public feedback to generate a final list of strategies for the MARC Board of Directors and Climate Action KC Executive Committee to approve for inclusion in the final plan.

The process took two years to complete (including delays related to the COVID-19 pandemic), with support from the European Union’s International Urban and Regional Cooperation Program, and with funding through small donations and small amounts of transportation and air quality planning funds. The staffing involved two planning professionals spending a good portion of their time during those two years with three additional staff making meaningful contributions. The team also benefitted from consulting support from Buro Happold to complete the emissions inventory and the climate risk and vulnerability assessment. While a plan for a single community would likely require less engagement and staff time than MARC’s regional approach, even their fulsome effort managed to succeed on a small budget, leveraging outside consulting where needed.

How the plan will improve resilience

The final 85-page action plan focused on both reducing carbon emissions and improving local resilience, while also putting a strong emphasis on social equity. In evaluating areas of greatest need, the team looked at the intersection of climate threats with areas of socio-economic stress as shown in Figure 8.

The action plan was divided into nine sections:

- Governance and leadership
- Community resilience
- Energy generation
- Energy efficiency
- Transportation and land use
- Urban greening
- Food and agriculture
- Solid waste
- Finance and innovation

Focus on Building Codes

The first goal of this plan was to improve building performance to both reduce GHG and improve buildings’ ability to stay habitable during an outage event. The plan recommended that municipalities should, for example, adopt the International Code Council’s [Property Maintenance Code](#), which affect existing buildings, along with its energy and other codes, which focus more on new buildings.

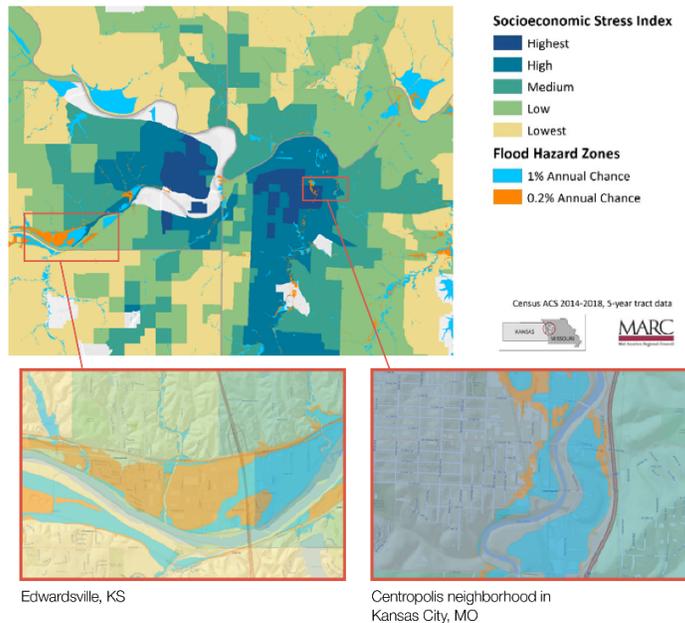


Figure 8: Flooding and socio-economic stress

Each section included a series of goals and potential actions that MARC and its members agreed to consider for implementation. Each goal included GHG reduction estimates, as well as a description of co-benefits that could be achieved. The plan also calls out where each goal connects to other goals to show where actions would need to be aligned. Each section also identifies local partners best positioned to help achieve the goals, as well as examples of other jurisdictions' successful actions, along with equity considerations.

For each goal in the Kansas City regional plan, elements are called out that highlight what is most important to the plan's developers. These themes center on the values of interconnection, collaboration and equity. Each goal also includes examples of current projects that are contributing to its realization.

The plan was not designed to be a binding document for MARC member governments, but rather a consensus document that members could adopt in whole or in part. To enable flexibility as members move forward with a voluntary planning framework, the plan focused less on implementation specifics and more on highlighting the connection opportunities between different efforts and between jurisdictions and stakeholder groups across the region.

Plan Highlights

The plan provides no dearth of resilience options with 27 goals, each of which contains one or more specific solutions for implementation. Some innovative ideas include:

- [“Increase and target sustainable, mixed-use and mixed-income development at key activity centers and corridors where infrastructure is already in place.”](#) This idea of simply focusing new construction in areas that are already more resilient is highly forward-looking.
- [“Use technology to monitor integrity of transportation infrastructure and relay real-time data to ensure responsiveness and limit disruptions to users.”](#) This use of technology to understand how major events are impacting transportation will both improve the capability to respond to problems, but will also provide lessons to avoid those problems during future events.
- [“Implement grid flexibility and smart grid strategies.”](#) This solution, while seemingly obvious, is not one we normally find in community resilience strategies because of the limited impact a single community can have on these regulator-driven decisions. That said, thinking about how a community can support utility transformation is innovative and potentially quite valuable in terms of community outcomes.
- [“Actively conduct business development and marketing to utilize existing financial tools and incentives.”](#) It would be nice to think that if you build it, they will come. However, many incentives and programs go unnoticed and unused because of a lack of proactive education efforts around their value to residents and businesses.
- [“Implement heat island mitigation strategies.”](#) It is critical to think about not just how the environment is affecting our communities, but how the design of our communities impacts our immediate environment. Use of building and zoning codes to reduce heat island effects has impacts on resilience, the economy and quality of life.
- [“Build collaborative relationships with public and private healthcare organizations to better educate and serve residents.”](#) Acknowledging that climate threats are a public health threat, the plan recognizes the role that health professionals play in community resilience.

Finally, the plan ends with two pages full of links to resources for communities looking to further explore how to achieve the goals it sets out.

Co-Benefits Identified

- Health & well-being
- Environmental quality
- Accessibility
- Affordability
- Cost savings
- Green job development
- Energy security
- Economic growth
- Resilience
- Health & well-being

Moving Forward

Some 20 municipalities and regional agencies have endorsed the plan, covering 83% of the MARC region's population. Some have experienced challenges adopting some plan elements, finding that they weren't prepared, or were concerned about its strong focus on equity. But many MARC member governments have embraced the plan in various positive ways to advance resilience and sustainability. For example:

- The City of Overland Park, Kansas, established a sustainability office as a direct result of collaboration with plan developers.
- The City of Mission, Kansas, is actively working on energy efficiency solutions and introducing new forms of transportation (including micro-mobility) within their city.
- Johnson County, Kansas, one of the wealthiest counties in the metro area, is actively working on making a significant impact on the entire county government using concepts from the action plan.
- The City of Kansas City, Missouri, adopted its own Climate Protection and Resiliency Plan that aligns with the regional plan.

What can we learn from MARC's Kansas City planning effort?

The Regional Kansas City Climate Action Plan considers local needs but is a non-binding plan for use by communities in their area. One way the plan accomplished this was by focusing strongly on connecting resilience actions to existing planning efforts. By making those connections clear, the plan was more easily adopted by communities already trying to make progress in other areas like sustainability, economic development and environmental justice. Tom Jacobs advises others developing resilience plans to:

“Just start. Start in whatever place makes sense and don't try to be perfect. Just make progress where you're able to make progress and then to try to connect the dots.”

The MARC team, Climate Action KC and numerous local municipalities have done more than just start. They are actively making progress on dozens of fronts because, as the plan says, “doing a lot is possible.”