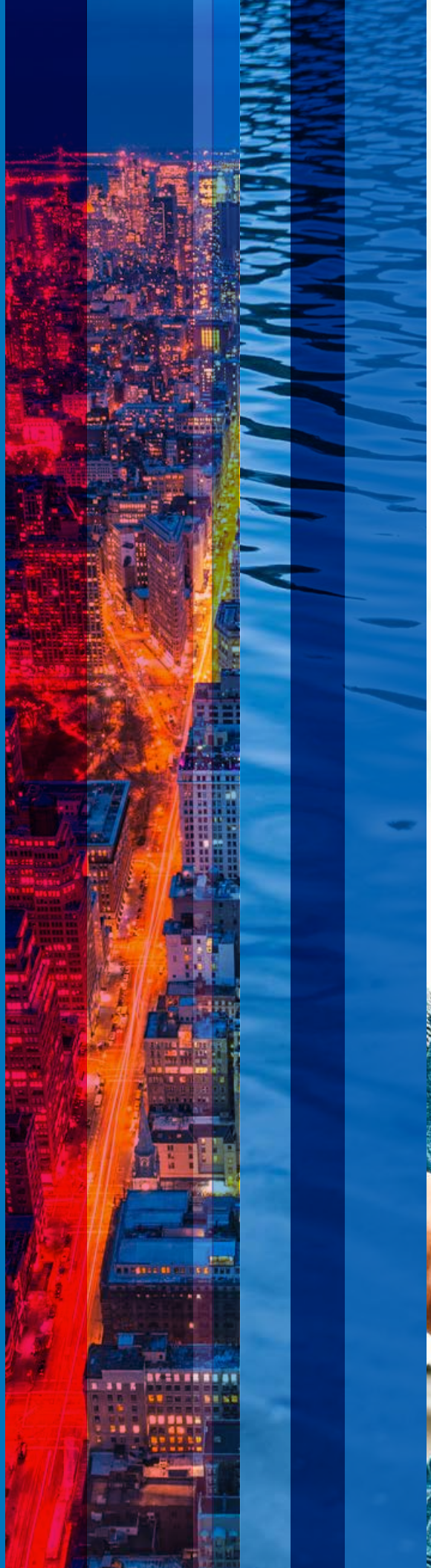


Partnerships and Collaboration

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Treat outreach as an ongoing relationship—engage early, communicate often, and keep listening.
- Position the utility as a regional leader that can pool resources and know-how and convene partnerships to deliver climate solutions at scale.
- Identify and involve all relevant players—including smaller or less visible groups—to ensure broad support and fewer surprises down the road.
- Focus climate investments on projects that not only cut emissions but also improve air quality, boost resilience, and solve real problems for the communities you serve.
- Cross-sector collaboration is key to scaling impact. Set clear expectations from the start to avoid confusion and get more done faster.

INTRODUCTION

Water utilities play a crucial role in their communities as managers of essential infrastructure, environmental stewards, and anchor institutions with a vested long-term interest in community health, equity, and economic resilience.

By cutting greenhouse gas emissions and actively engaging local stakeholders, utilities can demonstrate climate leadership for other institutions and businesses. Through practical actions and effective partnerships, utilities can significantly support community-wide net-zero goals.

Community engagement and strong partnerships are the keys to collaborative climate action. Water utilities can bring together different groups—including local governments, businesses, energy providers, community groups, and other utilities—to collaborate on research, pilot projects, and infrastructure improvements. This approach enables practical planning and coordinated investment and strengthens community relationships.

To sustain momentum and ensure every partner can actively participate and contribute, utilities must create transparent, accessible, and structured engagement processes that foster trust and inclusivity. Repeated, structured interactions build lasting trust and relationships and strengthen the foundation for collaborative climate solutions. Utilities can achieve sustained involvement through methods like forums, structured collaboration, and innovative agreements.

When community voices shape climate strategies, outcomes become more effective and meaningful climate action that benefits the entire community.

ACTIVITIES AND ACTIONS

Gather Input to Strengthen Greenhouse Gas Reduction Plans

Clear communication builds trust and encourages active community involvement in greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction efforts. Utilities should identify and include diverse groups like local businesses, community organizations, and partner agencies to gather useful feedback. Using various engagement methods like advisory committees, public forums, surveys, and community meetings ensures wide participation, refines GHG reduction strategies, and helps avoid potential blind spots in decision-making.

Regular ongoing engagement with clear accountability keeps community participation strong. Resources like translation services or stipends help ensure broader involvement from different community groups. By treating engagement as an ongoing process rather than a one-time effort, utilities can build lasting relationships.

Tip: *Hold meetings in familiar local places, use simple language and visuals, and seriously consider all community suggestions—even the unexpected ones.*

Form Partnerships for Collective GHG Mitigation Action

Water utilities are uniquely positioned to facilitate regional partnerships, particularly through watershed-scale planning and management, to significantly advance net-zero goals. By working closely with municipal sustainability offices, businesses, academic institutions, community organizations, and peer utilities, water utilities align climate actions with broader regional strategies, leveraging centralized roles that utilities inherently possess.

Formal partnership structures—such as memoranda of understanding (MOUs), joint projects, and formalized agreements like joint powers agreements—help clearly define roles, responsibilities, and shared goals. Assigning dedicated partnership managers ensures consistent coordination, communication, and accountability. Innovative resource-sharing approaches can further enhance collaboration. Acting as regional hubs, utility districts can effectively aggregate financial resources and technical expertise, promoting scalable climate solutions.

By fostering collaboration, utilities can accelerate progress through coordinated investment, open dialogue, and strong partnerships, solidifying their role as key players in regional sustainability efforts.

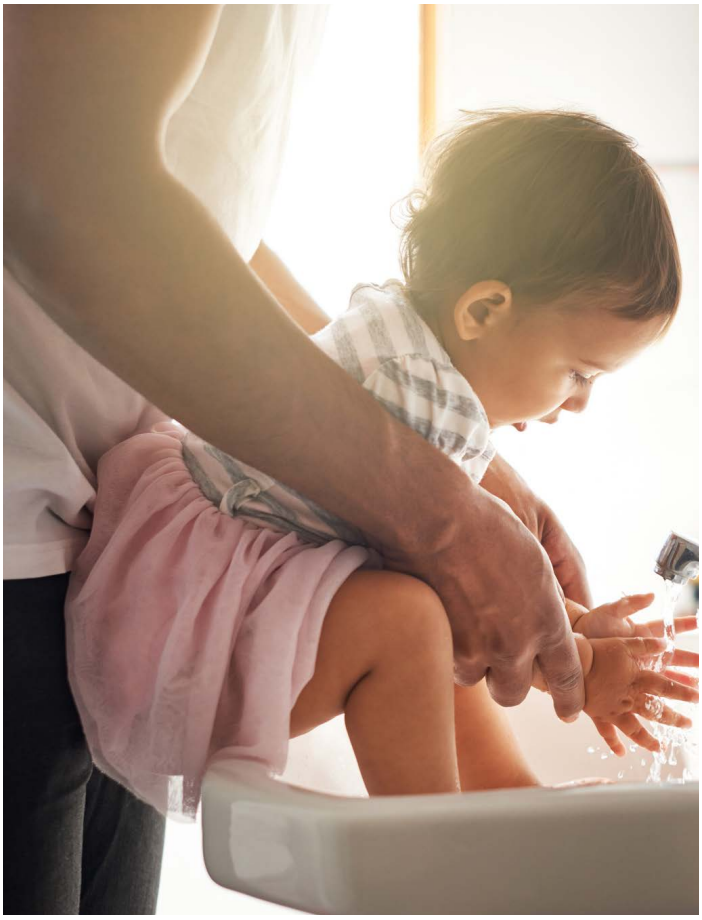
Tip: *Issue a "call for partnerships" to community organizations, businesses, universities, and municipalities to share existing initiatives and propose joint projects aligned with utility goals, identifying collaboration opportunities for energy efficiency, emissions reduction, and circular economy efforts.*

Community-Centered GHG Reductions

Whenever possible, GHG reduction efforts should prioritize community-focused solutions that directly benefit the areas most impacted by climate pollution and climate-related risks. As anchor institutions, utilities should also align projects with local priorities, ensuring emissions cuts support broader community goals and create meaningful co-benefits.

To achieve this, utilities should engage stakeholders early in the planning process and co-develop strategies that reflect local needs rather than imposing solutions that may be perceived as an added burden. This includes listening to community concerns and ensuring that the benefits of initiatives—such as cost savings and improved environmental conditions—accrue first to those most disproportionately affected by pollution and climate risks. By doing so, utilities can create solutions that are both effective and well-supported by the communities they serve.

Tip: *Map emissions sources with underserved, overburdened communities to help identify and prioritize high-impact reduction opportunities.*



KEY CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Overcoming Distrust and Engagement Fatigue

Some community groups may not trust utility intentions or become tired of frequent outreach efforts, leading to limited participation. Additionally, key groups, particularly smaller organizations, can be overlooked in stakeholder mapping, limiting effective engagement.

Solutions:

- Engage early and consistently to build trust across all communities.
- Use local networks and community leaders to identify all relevant stakeholders.
- Rotate engagement methods (e.g., online efforts, surveys, or in-person meetings) to maintain interest.
- Offer compensation and practical support to encourage ongoing participation.

Managing Conflicting Priorities and Coordination in Partnerships

Partners may have diverging goals, creating challenges in aligning efforts toward collective GHG reduction actions and slowing down decision-making.

Solutions:

- Clearly outline partnership goals, roles, and expectations through formal agreements.
- Appoint a dedicated partnership manager to coordinate and streamline communication.
- Allocate resources for equitable participation to ensure underserved communities are included and benefit from projects.

Simplifying Complex GHG Information

The technical nature of GHG reduction strategies can be difficult for non-experts to understand, potentially alienating stakeholders and reducing participation.

Solutions:

- Use plain language, visual aids, and relatable examples to simplify complex topics.
- Host workshops to walk through technical details.
- Offer translation services to ensure broader accessibility.

SPOTLIGHT

Metropolitan Council—Driving the Regional Community Solar Gardens Initiative

The Metropolitan Council is a regional policymaking body, planning agency, and provider of essential services—including operating the regional wastewater system and providing surface water, water supply, and wastewater planning—in the seven-county Twin Cities, Minnesota, metro area. Leveraging this broad portfolio, the Council coordinated a regional partnership to expand access for itself and partner communities to the state's Community Solar Garden (CSG) program.

Led by the agency's Environmental Services division, the initiative demonstrates how utilities can drive large-scale, cross-sector collaboration to meet ambitious climate goals while delivering meaningful community benefits. By bringing together more than 30 local governments, counties, and public entities, the Council enabled collective subscription to solar power—overcoming individual capacity limits and achieving a scale that would have been difficult alone.

The partnership significantly increased access to renewable energy, delivered long-term energy value, and cut climate pollution, delivering both environmental and economic value across the region.

Five-megawatt community solar garden at the Empire Water Resource Recovery Facility. Photo credit: Metropolitan Council

Collaborative Leadership and Approach

The Council's role as a facilitator and convener was essential to the initiative's success. The organization leveraged its procurement capabilities and legal and financial expertise that smaller jurisdictions often lack to facilitate complex renewable energy projects.

> *"Our motivation was deeply tied to our regional role—we serve the region," explained Sara Smith, Assistant General Manager of Operations Support Services at Metropolitan Council. "By managing procurement processes, developing contracting language, and handling legal due diligence, we enabled communities that otherwise lacked the resources to participate in renewable energy initiatives."*

In addition to facilitating subscriptions, the Metropolitan Council has advanced regional solar energy initiatives by hosting community solar gardens on its properties, such as the five-megawatt installation at the Empire Water Resource Recovery Facility and the three-megawatt installation at the Blue Lake Water Resource Recovery Facility.

Financial Viability and Innovation

In partnership with local governments, the Council adopted a pay-as-you-go subscription model, where the subscriber pays only for the energy produced based on subscription size with corresponding credits applied to utility bills, effectively eliminating upfront capital investments and reducing financial risks for all participants. Thorough economic analysis was key to demonstrating the project's long-term value and sustainability over its 20-year lifespan.

"It had to be financially feasible without adverse impacts on our ratepayers," noted Smith. "We screened opportunity against their financial performance to ensure participation wouldn't negatively impact community budgets."

Advancing Regional Decarbonization

While individual subscribers did not retain renewable energy credits—which were transferred to the utility, Xcel Energy—the collective participation advanced the region's overall clean energy goals. By supporting Xcel's ability to meet state renewable energy standards, the project delivered climate benefits to all electric utility customers. This model demonstrates how utilities can act as climate accelerators—facilitating actions that deliver system-wide benefits even when individual attribution is diffuse.

"Even though our subscribers aren't getting direct credit, together we're pushing renewables forward at a regional scale," Smith emphasized.

The initiative also offered key lessons in managing the complexities of multi-entity collaboration:

- Administrative Complexity: Coordinating with multiple solar developers, managing subscription transfers, and adapting to ongoing changes proved more resource-intensive than anticipated. To address this, the Council provided dedicated project management, technical assistance, and regular partner communication.
- Policy and Market Uncertainty: Shifting state regulations and evolving market conditions posed risks to project continuity. The Council mitigated this through joint advocacy and consistent stakeholder engagement, preserving momentum and confidence.
- Legal Structure and Transparency: Optional joint powers agreements provided clear governance and legal frameworks that smoothed the procurement process and built trust among participants.
- Equity in Access: A lottery system was implemented to equitably allocate solar subscriptions, promoting fairness and transparency (which are key principles of institutional legitimacy).
- Peer Learning: Participants valued opportunities to learn from one another, which fostered internal capacity-building and long-term institutional confidence in renewable energy procurement.

Outcomes and Regional Impact

The program ultimately secured approximately 33 megawatts of solar capacity, far surpassing what individual jurisdictions could have achieved alone. The outcome highlights how structured partnerships, transparent processes, and collaborative financing can collectively scale clean energy deployment while fostering trust and inclusion.

"Communities that wouldn't have participated individually could take advantage of our collective work. We made renewable energy accessible and financially feasible, achieving a win-win for our region," noted Smith.

Aerial view of the five-megawatt community solar garden at the Empire Water Resource Recovery Facility. Photo credit: Metropolitan Council

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

1. The US Water Alliance's One Water for America Policy Framework: Big Idea #1 lays out the case for advancing regional collaboration by tackling fragmented governance, promoting watershed-scale planning, and offering solutions at all levels to improve efficiency, equity, and environmental outcomes.
2. The Institute for Sustainable Communities' Regional Collaboratives for Climate Change—A State of the Art report examines US regional climate collaboratives, analyzing their structures, activities, successes, and challenges.
3. The Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) is a peer network of local government sustainability professionals working to advance equitable, resilient, and sustainable communities in partnership with regional networks across the US.

This paper is part of Net Zero Fundamentals, a collection of action-oriented briefs designed to help water and wastewater utilities cut climate pollution and chart a clear path to net zero. Each brief delivers practical insights, real-world utility examples, and implementation guidance for immediate impact. Access the collection of briefing papers on the US Water Alliance website.

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