

A CLIMATE MANIFESTO FOR COOLER CITIES

BY

THE CARFREE CITIES ALLIANCE

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1. We need action on climate now

Our planetary home is suffering: Heat is more unbearable each year. Wildfires are raging. Floods are worsening. There is no time to waste; we must take real action on climate now. Politicians must act decisively to avoid even more out-of-control climate events. Every day that we delay costs lives. Our attitude and approach to earth stewardship needs something of a revolution.



2. Climate mitigation and adaptation

Climate-resilient management of cities and regions must stress the dual objectives of climate mitigation and adaptation. Adaptation involves retrofitting urban systems by creating more resilience and guardrails to protect against disruption from extreme weather events. At the same time, mitigation means a dramatic reduction in the burning of fossil fuels. We must embrace new mobility cultures and a shift from focusing on mobility to accessibility. Both mitigation and adaptation are vital, now and into the future. Transforming cities to be greener, cooler, and less focused on motorized transport will literally save lives, while making things better for everyone.



3. The Name of the Game is Decarbonization

Climate mitigation is possible only if we drastically reduce our consumption of fossil fuels. We need to decouple our economies and energy use from oil, gas, and coal. Not only are fossil fuels fast-tracking climate chaos, but they create deadly local pollution.

We need to switch to renewables, which have already become much cheaper. We need to stop drilling for oil and gas, stop fracking, and start realizing that we can not keep consuming energy at this scale. This will necessarily involve divestment of fossil fuels from the financial, banking, and energy sectors. Fossil fuel companies may play a role in the energy transition, but should not be allowed to continue amassing enormous profits from a fundamentally destructive product; similar to how the tobacco industry went through a major transformation based on a reckoning with the health implications.



4. Cool our Cities -- Vital Steps of Climate Adaptation

While doing all we can to mitigate climate change, we must do what we can to protect ourselves from the ravages that have already started. The Urban Heat Island Effect, driven especially by asphalt and automobiles, raises temperatures in cities. This can lead us to extreme hardship, where human life can barely be sustained. We must immediately reduce the temperature in cities by creating and preserving green spaces, protecting waterbodies, and replacing hard paved surfaces (asphalt and concrete) into porous surfaces that absorb rather than repel water. It is also vital to facilitate a population shift from driving to walking, cycling, and public transport. A climate-ready city is an accessible city: one where everyday needs are close enough to reach on foot or by bicycle, and where streets are experienced as places to live, connect and play, and not simply spaces to move through. By focusing on accessibility rather than mobility, climate adaptation can create richer community life.



5. Setting Targets -- Policies and Plans to Make our Cities Cooler Faster

Recent decades have brought increasingly extreme summer heat, with many recorded heat-linked deaths. Drastically reducing paved surfaces and automobile use is essential. We need plans and policies (on a pathway with a set time frame) to convert road space and parking spaces into natural areas. Carefully calibrated policies should be implemented immediately and in the near term to discourage car use, with modal shift targets in place that see a dramatic switch from driving to walking, cycling, and public transport over a 3-7 year period. Targets need to be set for the near and medium future, not for multiple decades. Setting unambitious targets is essentially the same thing as delaying all meaningful action.



6. Accept that Change is Necessary

Change is coming to our cities and way of life whether we want it or not. Instead of fighting it, let's embrace positive change, reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and rooted in several paradigm shift approaches, such as regenerative design, degrowth, localism, or ecological economics. We need to change our policy and practice regarding transport, energy use, production and consumption. A shift towards truly sustainable systems can benefit our economies, environment, and health. This will amount to wins for everyone. While change on the ground can be implemented carefully and in ways that minimize disruption, our mental models and operative frameworks need to be revolutionized. Our end goal is to create livable environments and foster human and planetary health and flourishing, while turning down the dials on climate chaos and overheated cities.



7. Depoliticize Climate and the Environment

There is a lot of contested space these days on social and cultural topics. While acknowledging that there are many divergent points of view, perspectives around climate change and the environment should not be politicized or employed in the so-called culture wars. Cascading natural events and tipping points will not respect any person's opinion. We need to find common ground on climate urgency and natural protection, regardless of political ideology. We also need to be able to work together and put aside our political differences, in order to tackle these global threats. We call on all media establishments and political leaders to respect climate urgency and help nurture a spirit of cooperation for a common mission. We can have different ideas about how exactly to reach our goals; there should be no disagreement on the science of the climate crisis and the urgency of action.



8. Slowing down is also a worthwhile Goal

The choices we make in our cities don't happen in isolation – they are shaped by, and help shape, the wider economic systems we live under. We have to keep in mind that we live on a planet with finite resources. There is a famous statement that says “there is enough for everyone’s need, but not for even one person’s greed”. E.F. Schumacher popularized the notion that “small is beautiful”.

Intrinsically, there is enough abundance for everyone to have their needs met. An economic model built on constant growth and overconsumption pushes the exploitation of nature beyond what is feasible, and fuels a competitive labor and business environment that stresses human populations – creating scarcity and precarity for many, and contributing to conflict and instability. Nurturing local economies, while reducing the focus on needless consumption, will help create resilient and happier human populations, while also mitigating climate change.



9. Create dignified, child-friendly, comfortable, peaceful, carfree spaces for people

Our vision is one of true abundance. And fully possible. This is a carfree eco-city: urban and peri-urban spaces contain an abundance of nature and biodiversity - trees, fields, wild meadows, forests, ponds, streams, gardens, agriculture; and they provide everyone with plenty of space to play, walk, cycle, and go about their business. Urban streetscapes turn quieter, neighborhoods recover their social vitality, human mental and physical health begin to flourish; people can coexist peacefully with other humans and with nature. Streets and public spaces that are accessible, comfortable and welcoming benefit everyone: it is a game-changer for children, older people and those with disabilities. This fosters healthy childhood development, which is the cornerstone of a prosperous human civilization.



10. Let's take our Model and Scale it

Many simultaneous crises cry out for a single, complex solution. Climate urgency, a housing crisis, an environmental crisis, global conflict, resource scarcity, mental health crisis, overconsumption of natural resources, and the triggering of global tipping points, all point to the need for a very different way to organize our societies, cities, and economies. It is imperative for decision-makers, business leaders, civil society representatives, and universities to come together to work out a way forward that is responsive to all of these issues. We cannot afford to waste time by waiting or arguing. We must agree to find the right approach, with an attitude of mutual concern, care, compassion, and dedication to improving the situation for everyone on our beloved and threatened planet.

