Climate Action Plans: Symbolic Gestures or Action-Inspiring? Understanding Accountability Measures Utilized by Leading Indiana Cities

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Abstract

This study examines how local governments incorporate accountability measures into their climate action planning documents since it seems like many mayors treat the publication of the plan as the only thing holding them accountable while outlining no details on how to accomplish individual goals. This research evaluates two cities in Indiana, South Bend and Bloomington, that are known to be more progressive when it comes to environmental protection to see how similar their accountability mechanisms are by analyzing their climate plans, then that data is supplemented with interviews conducted with local leaders to understand why they chose the accountability measures they did. Through these case studies, it appears that Bloomington's climate action plan contains more mechanisms for accountability while South Bend's plan gives them more flexibility in how they report progress. These results highlight the fact that not all sustainability and climate plans are created equal, and local governments and citizens can use these findings to decide how to articulate goals in a way that makes it easier for accountability to take place.

Introduction

With scientists predicting that society might experience catastrophic effects of climate change if we are not on “a realistic glide path toward a carbon-free global economy by 2030” (Berwyn, 2019), it is more important than ever to discover what climate solutions are most likely to provide the solutions necessary to protect the planet. Given the lack of consistent federal leadership in the United States when it comes to climate policy, making it especially important for state and local governments to step up to the challenge. Local governments hold the primary responsibility for the delivery of services to people, and they are uniquely situated to address climate change in a way that makes the most sense for their specific communities. Climate change is a global issue that is extremely daunting and overwhelming due to the fact that the future is unclear and the threat posed is difficult to grasp for many, but it is important for large-scale action and comparatively small, local action to occur simultaneously in order to save the environment and society as we know it.

Many communities are taking the leap towards being more sustainable by beginning to measure their greenhouse gas emissions, and a smaller number of cities are going further by developing climate action plans. However, as the majority are not legally binding, it is imperative that accountability measures are published within them in order to make sure results are actually seen instead of being published symbolically. Issues arise here as cities struggle to publish realistic goals and make data-informed decisions. Thus, my research question is two-pronged: "Are climate action plans more intended for legitimacy-seeking or for performance management? Which plans provide more potential for accountability?" To answer these questions, I will be looking at South Bend, Indiana – a city of around 100,000 people that

recently adopted a climate action plan in November 2019 – and Bloomington, Indiana – a city of about 80,000 people who will adopt a climate action plan in early or mid-2021. I conducted a document analysis of each city's climate plans, looking for code words and phrases that indicate their intention of holding themselves accountable for meeting their goals. This was supplemented by interviews with local officials to better understand the decision-making process and expectations of each municipality. As there is little time to waste, I hope my research can provide insight to performance management scholars, public management scholars, and sustainability scholars as to what methods local governments might take when it comes to writing climate action plans in order to effectively reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and to behave more sustainably overall as there is a gap in the literature when it comes to evaluating how cities actually accomplish their goals.

Literature Review and Theory

History of Climate Action Plans

The federal government has, overall, been inconsistent when it comes to aggressive environmental protection, partially due to concerns as to whether or not it could constitutionally engage in pollution control (Sullivan et. al., 2019). This lack of leadership led to the "individualization of responsibility" according to Maniates (2001, p. 33) where it became common for Americans to accept "environmental degradation as the product of individual shortcomings." This is generally a dangerous way of thinking about climate change because it allows "little room to ponder institutions" and what they might be doing to harm the environment (Maniates, 2001, p. 33). The individualization of responsibility is also problematic because individuals are much more likely to have positive environmental attitudes than they are to have

positive environmental behaviors (Cheung et. al., 2019). In other words, individuals are likely to want the environment to be protected but they are unwilling to do the work themselves. Thus, by shifting the responsibility of climate change mitigation to the individual, little progress is made, showing that institutional action is necessary.

The federal government was aware of climate change as early as 1988 when James Hansen told Congress that the greenhouse effect would lead to severe consequences (Shabecoff, 1988). This spurred global action in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit where 179 countries were present to discuss sustainable development (United Nations, n.d.) and again in 1997 when the Kyoto Protocol was adopted to put the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change into motion ("What is the Kyoto Protocol?," n.d.). However, the United States failed to ratify Kyoto, showing that it is not safe to rely solely on federal government action since it is so unpredictable. State and local governments began taking serious action against climate change around 1990 after Toronto served as the first city to conduct a greenhouse gas inventory and create a reduction plan (Samson, 2001) which served as a model and inspiration for the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives' (ICLEI) Urban CO2 Reduction Plan for thirteen cities that grew into a much larger program of over 500 cities, the Cities for Climate Protection Campaign (Lindseth, 2004). A few years later, local governments continued stepping up to the challenge in the 2000s because of the Sierra Club's Cool Cities campaign and the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Climate Protection Agreement (Wheeler, 2008). While climate action began as a bipartisan effort (Rabe, 2002), it appears that cities today are much more likely to adopt a climate action plan if they are primarily composed of Democrats rather than Republicans (Hui, Smith, & Kimmel, 2019), showing the growing polarization of the issue. With this being

the case, Lioubimtseva and Cunha (2020) acknowledge the importance of including a variety of stakeholders in the climate action plan, such as individuals, local schools, and private sector organizations from the area. By involving multiple groups that can provide diverse viewpoints, local climate plans will hopefully be more effective and avoid being politicized.

Conditions Increasing the Likelihood of a Climate Action Plan

Aside from political affiliation of the city, Hui, Smith, and Kimmel (2019) also identify institutional capacity as well as the size of the city as being important factors today that determine whether or not a city will adopt a climate plan. Alongside institutional capacity, cities with offices of sustainability or other officials that are dedicated to sustainability are much more likely to publish a climate plan (Yeganeh, McCoy, & Schenk, 2020), because a city with more resources is able to dedicate more to climate mitigation. Similarly, Swann and Deslatte (2018) identify organizational capacity – "the level of resources, staffing, funding, technical expertise, community support and leadership for sustainability efforts" (p. 5) – to be the most important and reliable predictor of sustainability action. Thus, when a city experiences more resources, staff members, funds, technical support mechanisms, community engagement, and dedicated leadership when it comes to sustainability and environmental initiatives, it is more likely that more sustainability actions, such as adopting a climate action plan, will occur there than somewhere lacking these traits. The amount of public support a city sees with regards to stronger environmental policies also greatly dictates whether or not the city will develop a climate action plan (Yeganeh, McCoy, & Schenk, 2020). While the capabilities of the governmental body as well as the feelings of the public are important in all scenarios, they are both greatly influenced by the potential for severe consequences due to climate change (Yeganeh, McCoy, & Schenk,

2020). For example, if a city expects climate change to have a significant effect on the community, it makes sense that it will want to create an office of sustainability and hire more officials that will solely pay attention to environmental issues. The constituents of local officials will also be expected to push for more aggressive environmental policies if they fear that they might lose their homes to the consequences of climate change.

Governmental Accountability and Environmental Protection

Most existing research analyzes environmental action taken at larger levels, hardly giving attention to local efforts to mitigate climate change unless they are coming out of a large city or a city from a progressive state such as California. Najam, Papa, and Taiyab (2006, p. 15) note an "implementation deficit" made worse by "a dearth of enforcement mechanisms and little to no focus on ensuring that the instruments are effective in meeting their original objectives." While this is in reference to international climate agreements, the same concept may be applied to local climate action plans. For example, many local governments write their climate plans with their greenhouse gas emissions inventory in mind but "fail to follow through on conducting adequate emissions forecasts, setting meaningful reduction targets, or linking their mitigation measures to these forecasts and targets" (Boswell, Greve, & Seale, 2010, p. 460). Failing to take actual steps toward the goals announced in the climate action plan – assuming that reasonable goals are articulated in the first place – translates to meaningful progress rarely ever being made. However, if meaningful progress is made, it likely will be short-lived. Liao, Warner, and Homsy (2020) find that a plan's influence is strongest while it is being created and right when it is published, showing that local governments have a hard time with long-term sustainability planning. However, this can be combated by committing resources to and integrating social

equity within a city's climate planning document as Liao, Warner, and Homsy (2020) note that these have the power to increase sustainability actions taken by a local government over time instead of just taking action when there is a greater amount of momentum. Additionally, some climate action plans are not legally binding, making it easier to publish a plan without facing any type of consequences for not achieving the goals it addresses in the document. This allows local governments to continue publishing climate plans that act solely as symbols and do not include accountability measures.

Defining Accountability

Accountability is notable for having many different definitions. In terms of governmental accountability, however, it generally is used to describe the organization's degree of transparency and trustworthiness (Bovens, 2007). Especially pertinent to climate policy is a definition of accountability that considers how "agents answer to their principals" since many different levels of government are involved (Schoenefeld and Jordan, 2019, p. 369). This viewpoint is important when looking at climate action plans published by local governments in order to make sure they are legally consistent with plans that may have already been published by their county or by their state. However, since this paper addresses accountability in terms of how local government officials hold their organization accountable for meeting goals announced in the plan, accountability should be understood to represent how transparent the government is with regards to environmental progress and how the government agents follow through on the goals addressed in the climate action plan. Accountability might be demonstrated through including realistic goals and timelines as well as promises to publish data so the public can see whether or not the city is making the progress it intended to make.

Accountability Measures in Practice

One major component of accountability is a change in behavior. Moynihan and Lavertu (2012) identify leaders in an organization as critical when it comes to the development of new routines regarding the use of performance information. They found that management often displays "a strong commitment to achieving results" but is not very likely to review "the results or outcomes of the program(s)/operation(s)/project(s)" with employees (Moynihan and Lavertu, 2012, p. 595). However, when managers do promote the learning of routines, organizations are more likely to use information that details how well they are performing (Moynihan and Lavertu, 2012). This is important because it is easier for employees to change their actions and their mindsets when data is evaluated regularly so they know where to improve. With data regularly available, it is much more likely that goals will be achieved because the city will better understand where to dedicate resources. Despite knowing this, Park and Krause (2021) note that only forty to fifty percent of cities collected data annually for six categories of sustainability performance management they identified. While it is true that it is not necessary to collect data on every indicator annually because they all move at a different pace, it is still a poor sign that less than half of cities are collecting data regularly. This lack of data collection could also be attributed to the fact that cities focus more on goals that have the most short-term benefits and are the easiest to accomplish (Liao, Warner, & Homsy, 2020). If a city tackles the simplest goals first and considers them to be accomplished at that point, it is likely that they do not see data collection to monitor further progress necessary. Additionally, if a goal requires significant monitoring, it will probably not be prioritized since it is not as easy as others on the city's radar.

Although performance management systems would ideally be in place when cities engage in sustainability reporting, Niemann and Hoppe (2018) explain that the act of publishing a climate plan of any type is an act of accountability in itself. Once a plan is published, mayors know that the public – those who are paying attention to the city's environmental endeavors at least – can use it as a weapon if they do not follow through on the goals outlined. Thus, simply publishing a climate plan is an accountability measure, but it is important that cities go further by setting realistic goals and using data to evaluate their progress. Park and Krause (2021, p.7) found that cities struggle with this, as a majority of the individuals they interviewed mentioned that they thought their cities indicators were of "low-to-moderate quality in terms of measurability, reliability, and validity." By not setting reasonable goals or ones that are easily measurable, it is easy for little to no progress to be made in the name of not being able to properly monitor the status of the goals and not having the resources to accomplish what was previously proclaimed.

Summary

Previous research allows several predictions to be made when it comes to how a city might hold itself accountable for meeting the goals it outlines in its climate action plan. First, one might assume that there are no accountability measures incorporated into the climate plan at all since that is a major shortcoming of environmental policy at all levels. This would suggest the climate action plan being published symbolically, a symbol of the city's pro-environmental attitude but lack of pro-environmental behavior that Cheung *et. al.* (2019) found in individuals. Second, one could also assume that cities in areas that are predicted to be more affected by climate change might have more accountability measures throughout since there might be more

public support as well as more officials in the local government that can dedicate their time and resources to meeting environmental goals. Additionally, one might expect to see the most change where managers are extremely active role models in their office and are dedicated to building routines around reviewing performance data. While performance data is important in terms of cities holding themselves accountable for meeting their goals, it is clear that many municipalities do not utilize data to the extent necessary to make a real difference, but it appears that cities are moving towards better performance management techniques. However, these assumptions are primarily made based on data gathered from large cities, so it is important that new research looks at small and mid-size cities as well as ones from more diverse areas instead of just coastal cities or ones in blue states.

Theoretical Expectations

I do not expect to see accountability measures in South Bend's plans due to much of what I found in previous literature. First, South Bend faces many issues that appear to be more urgent than sustainability. Thus, there is a lack of community support for sustainability initiatives at the level that would be necessary to put pressure on the administration and fuel sustainability action. In terms of organizational capacity, South Bend does have an Office of Sustainability, which Swann and Deslatte (2018) suggest would increase the likelihood of sustainability actions. However, this office lacks funding and staffing, making its impact on the organizational capacity much lower than a fully funded and fully staffed office. Sustainability leadership is also absent, as the current mayor does list the environment on his list of priorities ("Mayor James Mueller," n.d.). South Bend's size and location also lead me to believe that not much will come out of the climate action plan. Yeganeh, McCoy, and Schenk (2020) explain that larger cities have more

opportunity for resources to be dedicated to environmental issues and that cities living in areas that are predicted to face the worst effects of climate change can be expected to develop climate plans. Given that South Bend is mid-size, it likely does not have the same resources that large cities have to make sustainable actions possible. Additionally, with South Bend being landlocked in the Midwest, it does not face the same risk that coastal cities do when it comes to issues like sea-level rise, making climate change a much less salient issue. This hurts the prospects for the climate action plan to be successful because public support will not be as strong in order to force the hand of the city government. However, South Bend did experience a 500-year flood and a 1000-year flood within 18 months of each other, making it possible that extreme weather events could demonstrate to citizens that climate change is a threat to them despite being landlocked. Finally, only around 29% of cities "track the impact of conservation programs on energy usage" by their governments (International County/City Management Association, 2016), showing that cities often implement programs then fail to follow up on them. This leads me to believe the city does not intend to and will not follow up on the goals outlined in the climate action plan that affect its operations specifically because it already has so many factors working against it according to existing theory. Thus, I do not expect to see South Bend's local government holding themselves accountable in writing despite their climate action plans being published so recently.

However, I do expect to see more accountability measures in Bloomington's plan based on previous literature. The community support in terms of sustainability is much greater than it is in South Bend, something that plays a significant role in the success of a climate action plan (Yeganeh, McCoy, & Schenk, 2020). Additionally, Bloomington pushed to raise taxes in fall 2020 – despite an already tight budget due to COVID-19 – to fund their environmental

initiatives, reflecting the priorities of the mayor and showing that sustainability leadership is present in Bloomington. The City also has an office dedicated to sustainable development, increasing the organizational capacity of Bloomington with dedicated funding and staff. With greater community support, political leadership, funding, and staffing, Bloomington's organizational capacity is high, especially considering the fact that climate change would not be expected to be a salient issue since the city is landlocked according to Yeganeh, McCoy, and Schenk (2020). With greater organizational capacity, it is expected that Bloomington will be taking a stronger stance on environmental issues and holding themselves accountable for accomplishing goals outlined in their climate action plan.

Data and Methods

To see how climate planning varies between cities, I analyzed the climate action plans or resiliency plans of two cities in Indiana: South Bend and Bloomington. These cities were chosen because of their similarities when it comes to size, politics, and the fact that they both house large universities, making it easier to compare them. Additionally, since previous literature looks most heavily at larger cities in historically Democratic-leaning states, it is important to study climate planning in cities like Bloomington and South Bend that are more mid-size and exist within the context of a Republican state government. This analysis looked for certain code words and phrases within the goals outlined in the plan that indicate a city's intention of holding themselves accountable, such as performance indicators, performance benchmarks, and performance outcomes. Performance indicators are quantitative or qualitative performance measures which may signal progress toward varied organizational priorities and goals (Deslatte, Stokan, & Helmke-Long, 2021). Performance benchmarks are metrics used to compare

performance against other organizations or past performance (Deslatte, Stokan, & Helmke-Long, 2021). Performance outcomes are results of actions taken by the organization (Deslatte, Stokan, & Helmke-Long, 2021). Once this first cycle of coding was completed, I ran a second cycle where I placed each indicator, benchmark, and outcome into one of seven categories. These categories were: legitimacy seeking purposes; accountability purposes; management purposes; legitimacy seeking and accountability purposes; legitimacy seeking and management purposes; accountability and management purposes; and legitimacy seeking, accountability, and management purposes. Because of the nature of performance benchmarks being easily measurable, all goals that were coded as performance benchmarks in the first cycle of coding were identified as having an accountability component in this cycle of coding. Since performance indicators are used to show some form of progress but are not as easy to measure as performance benchmarks since the progress is not being compared to anything, I coded them as having a legitimacy seeking component because it is an attempt to show the public that progress is happening but cannot be used as easily for accountability purposes without a comparison being made. Goals were coded as having a management component when the goal involved a project that the city had a direct hand in because it was more directly related to city operations. These classifications were important in order to determine what each plan is best suited for: proving to the public that action will be taken or for internal management decisions. This allowed me to decide which plan was more focused on accountability to the public rather than accountability within the organization, as that is more valuable for this study since greater accountability occurs when the organization is accountable to someone or something greater than just the organization.

This document analysis was supplemented by interviews conducted with officials from each city. The interviews took place from December 2020 to February 2021 over Zoom due to the coronavirus. The interviews and transcripts of the interviews were watched or read in order to add context to the performance language used in the climate plans. This portion of the data addresses the question of why accountability measures might vary as I could dig deeper into the specific conditions in each city, especially considering that COVID-19 and the social justice movements in 2020 had such a huge impact on local economies and priorities. Thus, the interviews are valuable because they provide a greater level of detail about climate planning instead of solely relying on the plan itself to convey all the nuances.

South Bend and Bloomington were chosen because we would expect to see similar accountability measures in their plans as they are very comparable cities since both are major college towns in the state with mid-size populations. This is valuable because I can make more comparisons between the two since we are able to control for a lot of variables, giving a deeper understanding of why accountability measures might vary. Additionally, current literature looks at large cities primarily, so it will be valuable to gather data on more mid-size cities in order to better understand climate planning in a way that can be applied to more cities that have smaller populations.

To analyze the data, Microsoft Excel was used. In the first cycle of coding, a table was created for each city. In the first column, each goal outlined in the climate action plan was listed. In the second column, the goals were coded as performance indicators, performance benchmarks, or performance outcomes. The frequency of each code was calculated and turned into a percentage of the total amount of goals in the document. The second cycle of coding took the

same form, but the second column's values described whether the goals were useful for accountability, management, legitimacy-seeking, or some combination of those three.

This data collection method is limited in the sense that document analysis is subjective. While I followed a code book developed by other researchers, it is still possible I coded certain phrases differently than the creators and others attempting to code the plans would have. Additionally, there was not a code book for the second cycle of coding, making it difficult to adhere to a strict set of rules. Thus, there may be some inconsistencies in coding and difficulty replicating these methods since so much of it depends on the individual doing the coding. Another limitation is the fact that the plan coded for Bloomington was its final draft from October of 2020. It is likely that some changes will be made before it is published in 2021, so the coding might not hold true if much of the wording is changed in the goals.

Results and Analysis

Upon coding each climate action plan for performance management key words, I found that Bloomington's plan contained more goals that are performance benchmarks than South Bend's plan. 29% of the goals coded in Bloomington's plan were identified as performance benchmarks while they only made up 10% of the goals in South Bend's plan. The benchmarks in each plan were very different, with South Bend's focusing solely on greenhouse gas emissions reductions and Bloomington's spanning many areas but not specifically mentioning greenhouse gas emissions. South Bend was much more focused on using performance indicators while it was goal-setting, shown by the fact that the other 90% of its goals are performance indicators. The rest of Bloomington's goals – 71% – are also classified as performance indicators. In many cases, the indicators in South Bend's plan were more sector-specific than Bloomington's

indicators. For example, one goal South Bend identifies is reducing vehicle miles traveled and single occupancy vehicle trips taken in the city then goes on to outline several more goals that relate to that overarching goal such as promoting public transit services, transitioning to cleaner vehicle fuel sources, and promoting carpool services. Bloomington's indicators often just addressed a larger goal, such as promoting water conservation or increasing the local food market. Neither plan identified any performance outcomes in its goals. Performance benchmarks allow the city to be more accountable to its residents since there are clear, easily measurable results that citizens can expect to see, making Bloomington's plan better designed for accountability purposes than South Bend's since performance indicators can be measured numerous ways when it is time to report on progress.

In the second cycle of coding, I identified every goal in both plans as having a legitimacy seeking component, but neither plan had any goals that were solely for management or for accountability. The goals identified as best for legitimacy seeking purposes were typically less specific, overarching ideas related to promoting, supporting, or improving certain initiatives. For example, South Bend's goal to increase energy efficiency across several sectors and Bloomington's goal to increase greenspace throughout the community were identified as legitimacy seeking statements because they can be used to generate support in the community by showing a general commitment to sustainability but lack many specifics. In South Bend's plan, 35% of its goals were identified as useful only for legitimacy seeking purposes. 55% of the goals were useful for legitimacy and management, and 10% of the goals were useful for legitimacy seeking, accountability, and management purposes. In Bloomington's plan, 38% of the goals were solely for legitimacy seeking, and 33% were useful for legitimacy seeking and management

purposes. Only 29% of the goals were useful for legitimacy seeking, accountability, and management. Overall, South Bend's plan is very focused on greenhouse gas emissions, promoting public transit, and transitioning to renewable energy, whereas Bloomington's plan spans more sectors and topics. This led to the plans having little overlap. By focusing on fewer policy areas, South Bend was able to include more goals that are better for internal management decisions as they read more as guiding statements for a larger goal. For example, South Bend wrote that it hopes to update building codes from an energy standpoint and create municipal incentives for businesses that become more energy efficient. These goals both are written in ways that make the City directly responsible, making them great as internal management tools. Bloomington's plan saw more goals with accountability in mind in conjunction with management due to its increased use of performance benchmarks that place progress in more black and white terms. Altogether, this indicates that South Bend's plan might be better as a symbol for fighting climate change rather than one that will produce significant results, and Bloomington's plan has more opportunities for accountability to take place when it comes to meeting the goals outlined in the plans. These results confirm my hypothesis that Bloomington would be setting itself up for greater accountability in its climate action plan than South Bend. However, information obtained from the interviews with local officials from each city shows that South Bend and Bloomington are in very different places in terms of sustainability planning, so it is appropriate that South Bend is focused on legitimacy-seeking rather than climate results at this point in time while Bloomington looks more towards actionable goals.

Discussion and Implications

While South Bend's plan might not make it as easy as Bloomington's does to hold the administration accountable, there are a few reasons that could explain that. South Bend's plan was published in November of 2020, two months before Pete Buttigieg vacated the Mayor's Office and a new mayor took his place. Buttigieg valued sustainability and climate planning, especially after seeing a 1,000-year rain and 500-year flood within 18 months of each other during his administration. However, it was unclear what would happen in the Mayor's Office once he left, and no one could predict if the new mayor would value the environment in the same way. Thus, it is possible that the climate plan purposely used performance indicators rather than performance benchmarks, because it would not hold the new administration responsible for meeting such specific goals outlined by previous leaders. This gives the new mayor and his administration a lot more flexibility when it comes to creating his own agenda instead of just inheriting Buttigieg's.

From the interviews, it was also clear that South Bend placed more of an emphasis on emissions reduction rather than climate change adaptation. The South Bend interviewee (2020) mentioned that the administration was so focused on the "low-hanging fruit" that it essentially hit a wall once all the simple, more straightforward goals were met because the more difficult projects require significantly more funding and time. This gives insight on South Bend's goal-setting process, suggesting that the administration might have used more performance indicators instead of benchmarks because it was aware of the ceiling it reached after accomplishing simple sustainability goals. The South Bend official (2020) mentioned that funding for the Office of Sustainability was originally sourced from the Recovery Act, and a

clear, steady source of funding was never established after that. Thus, it is possible that the City of South Bend knew it would be dealing with a lack of resources in the future and did not feel comfortable committing itself to meeting such specific goals. Finally, the South Bend interviewee (2020) mentioned that the City struggled to justify funding initiatives that do not provide as many "short-term products to residents" as other projects might. A lack of funding combined with little support from the City's leadership exacerbates the problem that sustainability initiatives are often described as "nice to have" (South Bend official, 2020) rather than a necessity in South Bend – and likely many other cities – when it comes to city planning. Overall, unclear priorities in the new administration, a lack of secure funding, and failure to prioritize climate planning in South Bend likely explains why they chose to be more vague with their goals, writing them as performance indicators instead of performance benchmarks because they did not feel comfortable being held accountable if they could not accomplish what was outlined.

One important implication of South Bend shying away from performance benchmarks and relying more heavily on performance indicators is that they will be able to manipulate their data in ways that put them in the most favorable light if anyone is ever to ask about their progress regarding their climate action plan. Since performance indicators can be measured in many ways, the City might be able to pick and choose which data they highlight. If some data makes it look like South Bend is making significant progress while other data shows shortcomings, they have the flexibility to focus on the data that makes them look the best since the performance indicators do not specify how the goal needs to be measured. For example, if they were reporting on their progress when it comes to the goals of "expand[ing] energy

efficiency audits for buildings across multiple sectors" (City of South Bend, 2019) and they were successful in doing that in one sector but not any others, they would be able to talk more about their success in the single sector while brushing their lack of progress in other sectors under the rug.

Additionally, it is difficult to create meaningful progress through a plan that is so focused on external communication with citizens without also having internal mechanisms of how to do it more clearly laid out. Of Niemann and Hoppe's (2018, p. 209) three categories of outcomes, South Bend's plan appears to fall most into the "political–symbolic" category as its main goals are closer to agenda-setting and legitimacy-seeking. There is little in the plan that would be useful for internal communication within the organization, and, without focusing on organizational change and management, it is unlikely that much will come of the plan since it seems to be more designed for public consumption. A benefit of this might be that the public will be more informed about the City's environmental priorities by the time that South Bend is ready to take a stronger stance on climate adaptation and actually enact change, as the interviewee mentioned that public input was not as important as they were addressing the easier sustainability goals (South Bend official, 2020). On top of this, after experiencing extreme weather events like the 1,000-year rain and 500-year flood, theory suggests that residents would be more dedicated to the cause (Yeganeh, McCoy, & Schenk, 2020). Additionally, this legitimacy-seeking behavior might be appropriate for the time being in order to secure a stable source of funding in order to be effective in the future and continue tackling the larger sustainability projects that require more money. However, knowing that the most change is most likely to occur right around the publication of the climate plan (Liao, Warner, & Homsy, 2020), it is unfortunate that COVID-19

shifted the priority so rapidly in early 2020 when the momentum would have been greatest. Given the lack of accountability mechanisms in the plan and insight from the South Bend official (2020), it is clear that South Bend's climate action plan has been shelved, but whether that is temporary or permanent is unknown.

Bloomington's plan, on the other hand, likely benefited greatly from being written throughout the coronavirus pandemic and throughout the social justice movements that took place across the country in 2020. As Liao, Warner, and Homsy (2020) explain, sustainability plans are more likely to be successful in the long-term when they incorporate social equity, and Bloomington had that at the forefront of its mind while creating this draft, likely influencing a lot of the goals created. On top of this, Bloomington did not experience a change in administration at any point in the planning process and will not experience one immediately after the plan is adopted. This means that the plan was able to be drafted knowing that the current administration's priorities will hold true, and they were able to write goals that they know have a good chance of being implemented. With this clarity, Bloomington was able to be more specific in its goal-setting, incorporating significantly more performance benchmarks because it had a more secure idea of what the future might hold.

While Bloomington has set itself up to be held accountable by the public, the amount of performance benchmarks puts them on the clock, placing pressure on them that South Bend will not be experiencing since they were not as specific. Similar to South Bend, Bloomington has tackled its "low-hanging fruit" and is ready to move on to larger, more expensive projects according to the Bloomington official (2020). This may prove to be challenging as the Bloomington interviewee (2020) notes that there is "always something that seems more

emergent" than sustainability initiatives and climate planning, something that the City of South Bend also struggles with and could possibly result in the climate action plan being shelved in Bloomington as well. While the City likely benefited from writing the plan during the coronavirus pandemic, able to know not to over-commit itself in a time when everything is so unpredictable, the Bloomington official (2020) explained that COVID-19's reach is unknown, and it is unclear how it will affect the City's budget for the next few years while it recovers. However, the Bloomington interviewee (2020) noted that funding for sustainability initiatives and the climate action plan are fine for the upcoming year, and people are still interested in sustainability even in such difficult times.

An implication of Bloomington's heavy use of performance benchmarks is that it will have to become more data savvy in order to report results when necessary. The Bloomington official (2021) notes the City's effort of creating an interactive dashboard because, "If there's no way for people to engage with the information, it stays, like, a static PDF." The City appears to be aware of the important role data will play in accomplishing goals in its climate action plan, shown by the frequency of data collection, specific to each indicator but with data being collected at least annually (Bloomington official, 2021). This is a good sign since Park and Krause (2021) note a major problem with sustainability planning being a lack of data collection to inform decision-making, so it is promising that Bloomington does not appear to fall into that statistic. Finally, Bloomington's effort to contextualize the data is especially important given that the population turnover is so high considering that Indiana University students make up almost half the town's population. The City plans on "telling a story with the data" (Bloomington official, 2021) in a way that will explain why their baselines are what they are, further

reengaging the population and giving them the tools necessary to better understand the climate action plan. This large desire for community involvement and data utilization, on top of their incorporation of specific performance benchmarks rather than just performance indicators, is a positive sign that Bloomington will see success with their climate action plan well into the future.

Both cities are moving in opposite directions, but they are similar in the sense that neither plan includes any clear performance outcomes. This is likely because performance outcomes in this context would look at the overarching global goal of climate change mitigation, and each city created very specific goals that make the most sense for their environment rather than global change. It is also possible that each city does not have a clear image of what its performance outcomes will be when it comes to climate and sustainability planning. While it would be more reassuring if more performance outcomes were included, it is understandable that they are missing since funding is so unpredictable due to the pandemic and other social issues that are occuring in tandem with the climate plans. As the Bloomington official (2021) noted, many goals will get more specific over time – at least in Bloomington – so it is possible that more specific performance outcomes will become clear soon, further allowing citizens to hold the administrations accountable.

Conclusion

As many try making individuals feel responsible for all the environmental degradation taking place, it is important to recognize then remind individuals that organizations – especially governments organizations at all levels – should be taking environmental action first. The "individualization of responsibility" outlined by Maniates (2001, p.33) is dangerous because of

the concept of the tragedy of the commons; there will always be someone who pollutes more than the rest of us just because they are able to, making it inefficient and far too risky to trust every individual to act on behalf of the planet's best interests. Thus, it is critical that government organizations take responsibility when it comes to combating climate change, and I hope that this research puts that at the forefront of the reader's mind.

Since most of the existing literature surrounding climate action plans deals with large cities, studying South Bend and Bloomington will allow researchers to begin making generalizations about mid-size cities. Additionally, South Bend and Bloomington are blue cities in a red state while most scholarly work studies blue cities in blue states, so this will be valuable research that will allow scholars to make new predictions based on more diverse data. Finally, studying South Bend and Bloomington around the first year of its publication of the climate action plan will be important because it is such a crucial time when it comes to developing new routines and will show how seriously cities tend to take their climate plans.

Overall, this research will hopefully provide insight as to how local governments can truly make a positive impact on climate change since we do not have much time to change our ways before it is too late. I also hope this research empowers citizens to hold their local administrations accountable when it comes to sustainability actions since so much power lies with the people. Words have consequences, and it is important for people to understand how climate action plans can be written in different ways to accomplish different goals. This knowledge can create a more informed public that can be more involved in the climate planning process and is more capable of holding government organizations accountable once climate goals have been outlined. There is no time to waste when it comes to climate change adaptation and

mitigation, and I hope this research creates more active participants in local government endeavors as well as more leaders who can write plans in a way that gives cities and residents a better chance of seeing meaningful progress.

Appendix: Data Tables

Bloomington		
Phrase	Code	
decrease vehicle miles traveled by 8% by 2030	benchmark	
support and encourage electric vehicle adoption, achieve 30% of vehicles and 15% of VMT community-wide by 2030	benchmark	
increase distributed renewable energy to 18% of citywide consumption by 2030	benchmark	
increase energy efficiency citywide 16% for electricity and 2% for natural gas by 2030	benchmark	
support decarbonization of the local electricity grid	indicator	
increase landfill solid waste diversion by 30% by 2030 (26,500 ton reduction)	benchmark	
educate, motivate, and empower the public to achieve waste reduction and diversion	indicator	
promote increased water conservation citywide	indicator	
maintain source and drinking water quality through climate related changes	indicator	
reduce energy use associated with treating and transporting water and wastewater by 20% by 2030	benchmark	
mitigate flood hazards and impacts	indicator	
increase food and nutrition security citywide	indicator	
increase local agriculture resilience to climate shocks	indicator	
increase and stabilize local food market	indicator	
educate, engage, and empower the public for climate health and safety	indicator	
respond to climate risks and impacts	indicator	
prepare Bloomington for climate risks and impacts	indicator	
increase quantity and quality of greenspace within the community	indicator	
increase quantity and quality of climate adaptive native habitats	indicator	
increase citywide tree canopy coverage by 3% by 2030	benchmark	
reduce stormwater and micro heat island impacts	indicator	
build marketplace climate resilience	indicator	
attract, create, and support businesses that are committed to sustainability and climate goals	indicator	
develop new mechanisms for financing City climate action plan implementation	indicator	
benchmark	7	29%
indicator	17	71%
outcome	0	0%

Figure 1: First Cycle Coding Excel Table for Bloomington

South Bend		
Phrase	Code	
reduce GHG emissions 26% by 2025	benchmark	
reduce GHG emissions 45% by 2035	benchmark	
reduce GHG emissions 100% by 2050	benchmark	
reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and reducing single occupancy vehicle (SOV) trips	indicator	
promote and strengthen public transit	indicator	
promote and improve bike share and alternative mobility program options	indicator	
promote and advance biking and walking in the community through education and community partnerships	indicator	
reduce the length and frequency of vehicle trips through land development policies and economic development strategies	indicator	
prioritize infrastructure investments that advance regional access to transit and active transportation options within existing urbanized areas	indicator	
promote carpool and vanpool services	indicator	
promote and strengthen passenger rail services for regional travel	indicator	
transition to cleaner, more efficient vehicle fuels and technology in passenger and commercial vehicles	indicator	
undertake and promote diesel engine retrofits throughout municipal and commercial fleets	indicator	
remove older vehicles with poor fuel efficiency from the community, and replce them with alternative fuel vehicles, like hyrbid and electric vehicles	indicator	
advocate for increased state vehicle emissions testing requirements in St. Joseph County	indicator	
promote any-idling technology locally	indicator	
promote upgrades to vehicles that reduce road friction and wind resistance	indicator	
identify how adoption of autnomous vehicle technology can drive fuel efficiency and emissions reductions	indicator	
increase energy efficiency across residential, industrial, and commercial sectors	indicator	
expand energy efficiency audits for buildings across multiple sectors	indicator	
enact an energy benchmarking ordinance for larger buildings	indicator	
expand South Bend's regional energy efficiency workforce	indicator	
update building codes, to increase energy efficiency requirements on new construction and major renovation projects	indicator	
develop municipal incentive programs that support adoption of energy efficiency improvements in commerical and industrial buildings	indicator	
transition to renewable energy sources	indicator	
advocate for the conversion to renewable energy sources by local energy utilities	indicator	
advocate for increased state incentives to support adoption of renewable energy sources	indicator	
develop municipal incentive programs that support adoption of renewable energy sources	indicator	
oversee the adoption of renewable energy sources into municipal buildings	indicator	
continue to update and maintain municipal permitting and procurement guidelines that facilitate the adoption of renewable energy sources	indicator	
integrate renewable energy generation with municipal land use and zoning policy	indicator	
benchmarks	3	10%
indicator	28	90%
outcome	0	0%

Figure 2: First Cycle Coding Excel Table for South Bend

Bloomington		
Phrase	Code	
decrease vehicle miles traveled by 8% by 2030	I,a,m	
support and encourage electric vehicle adoption, achieve 30% of vehicles and 15% of VMT community-wide by 2030	I,a,m	
increase distributed renewable energy to 18% of citywide consumption by 2030	I,a,m	
increase energy efficiency citywide 16% for electricity and 2% for natural gas by 2030	I,a,m	
support decarbonization of the local electricity grid	I,m	
increase landfill solid waste diversion by 30% by 2030 (26,500 ton reduction)	I,a,m	
educate, motivate, and empower the public to achieve waste reduction and diversion	I,m	
promote increased water conservation citywide	I	
maintain source and drinking water quality through climate related changes	I	
reduce energy use associated with treating and transporting water and wastewater by 20% by 2030	I,a,m	
mitigate flood hazards and impacts	I	
increase food and nutrition security citywide	I	
increase local agriculture resilience to climate shocks	I	
increase and stabilize local food market	I	
educate, engage, and empower the public for climate health and safety	I,m	
respond to climate risks and impacts	I,m	
prepare Bloomington for climate risks and impacts	I,m	
increase quantity and quality of greenspace within the community	I	
increase quantity and quality of climate adaptive native habitats	I	
increase citywide tree canopy coverage by 3% by 2030	I,a,m	
reduce stormwater and micro heat island impacts	I	
build marketplace climate resilience	I,m	
attract, create, and support businesses that are committed to sustainability and climate goals	I,m	
develop new mechanisms for financing City climate action plan implementation	I,m	
I	9	38%
a	0	0%
m	0	0%
I,a	0	0%
I,m	8	33%
a,m	0	0%
I,a,m	7	29%

Figure 3: Second Cycle Coding Excel Table for Bloomington

South Bend		
Phrase	Code	
reduce GHG emissions 26% by 2025	I,a,m	
reduce GHG emissions 45% by 2035	I,a,m	
reduce GHG emissions 100% by 2050	I,a,m	
reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and reducing single occupancy vehicle (SOV) trips	I,m	
promote and strengthen public transit	I	
promote and improve bike share and alternative mobility program options	I	
promote and advance biking and walking in the community through education and community partnerships	I	
reduce the length and frequency of vehicle trips through land development policies and economic development strategies	I,m	
prioritize infrastructure investments that advance regional access to transit and active transportation options within existing urbanized areas	I,m	
promote carpool and vanpool services	I	
promote and strengthen passenger rail services for regional travel	I	
transition to cleaner, more efficient vehicle fuels and technology in passenger and commercial vehicles	I,m	
undertake and promote diesel engine retrofits throughout municipal and commercial fleets	I,m	
remove older vehicles with poor fuel efficiency from the community, and replace them with alternative fuel vehicles, like hybrid and electric vehicles	I,m	
advocate for increased state vehicle emissions testing requirements in St. Joseph County	I,m	
promote any-idling technology locally	I	
promote upgrades to vehicles that reduce road friction and wind resistance	I	
identify how adoption of autnomous vehicle technology can drive fuel efficiency and emissions reductions	I	
increase energy efficiency across residential, industrial, and commercial sectors	I	
expand energy efficiency audits for buildings across multiple sectors	I	
enact an energy benchmarking ordinance for larger buildings	I,m	
expand South Bend's regional energy efficiency workforce	I	
update building codes, to increase energy efficiency requirements on new construction and major renovation projects	I,m	
develop municipal incentive programs that support adoption of energy efficiency improvements in commerical and industrial buildings	I,m	
transition to renewable energy sources	I,m	
advocate for the conversion to renewable energy sources by local energy utilities	I,m	
advocate for increased state incentives to support adoption of renewable energy sources	I,m	
develop municipal incentive programs that support adoption of renewable energy sources	I,m	
oversee the adoption of renewable energy sources into municipal buildings	I,m	
continue to update and maintain municipal permitting and procurement guidelines that facilitate the adoption of renewable energy sources	I,m	
integrate renewable energy generation with municipal land use and zoning policy	I,m	
I	11	35%
a	0	0%
m	0	0%
I,a	0	0%
I,m	17	55%
a,m	0	0%
I,a,m	3	10%

Figure 4: Second Cycle Coding Excel Table for South Bend

l	legitimacy
a	accountability
m	management
l,a	legitimacy and accountability
l,m	legitimacy and management
a,m	accountability and management
l,a,m	legitimacy, accountability, and management

Figure 5: Legend for Second Cycle of Coding

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