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Cities Take Lead On Environment As Debate Drags At Federal Level

522 Mayors Have Agreed To Meet Kyoto Standards

By Anthony Faiola and Robin Shulman
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NEW YORK -- To the long list of evils being blamed on global warming -- hurricanes, heat waves, melting ice caps -- tack on the smaller interior of Steve Benesoczky's cab. Inside, his passengers can already feel the squeeze of climate change in their knees.

"Of course it's less comfortable. Look, there's less leg room," said Benesoczky, 55, as he pointed to the back of his new taxi -- a hybrid [Ford Escape](#).

The company Benesoczky works for has started complying with a new directive ordering [New York's](#) entire fleet of 13,000 yellow cabs to go green over the next five years -- part of an effort by the nation's largest city to cut its carbon emissions 30 percent by 2030.

Most taxis here are now roomy-if-gas-guzzling [Ford Crown Victorias](#). But hundreds of boxy hybrid cabs have already hit the roads, gradually altering the autoscape of [Manhattan's](#) glittering byways.

"Some people are complaining -- especially the tall ones -- but most are saying, 'Finally, you're doing something for the environment,' " said Benesoczky, a Hungarian émigré and [New York City](#) cabbie of two-and-a-half decades. "Look, people will make a little sacrifice if they have to. They already are."

New York is among a faction of U.S. cities from [Boston](#) to [Portland, Ore.](#), that are racing ahead of the federal government in setting carbon emission targets and developing concrete strategies to deal with climate change. Their solutions are already beginning to alter the fabric of life for millions of urban dwellers.

It is a direct consequence, municipal officials and analysts say, of the growing perception inside city halls that the Bush administration has largely ignored an issue that has reached a tipping point in American culture.

A nationwide poll released in April showed a third of Americans now call global warming the world's single largest environmental problem -- double the number a year ago, according a Washington Post-ABC News-Stanford University survey. Though the administration agreed this week to "seriously consider" a European proposal to slash emissions 50 percent by 2050, the

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[United States](#) rebuffed efforts to make the cuts mandatory.

"Because of what many see as a policy failure on this issue in Washington, you see state and city governments stepping up and taking the lead on global warming," said Daniel C. Esty, director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy. "You've got people in [Europe](#) saying that America is doing nothing on global warming, but that's not true. You are seeing real action. But it's happening in a local way."

What started in 2005 with the frustrations of one mayor -- [Seattle](#)'s Greg Nickels -- over the Bush administration's resistance to the [Kyoto](#) Protocol has since grown to become a major nationwide movement. Nickel's "U.S. Mayors [Climate Protection](#) Agreement" now includes 522 mayors representing 65 million Americans who have pledged to meet the Kyoto Protocol's standard of cutting greenhouse gas emissions 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

Officials are still attempting to assess the overall impact of the combined effort of local governments. But they say those measures -- along with mild weather and other factors -- significantly contributed to the 1.3 percent drop in U.S. fossil-fuel related emissions to 5.88 billion metric tons last year.

In [Austin](#), city residents are becoming more eco-friendly whether they like it or not. The city has adopted a policy incrementally increasing requirements for energy efficiency in private homes. By 2015, all new single family homes must use 60 percent less energy than today's standards. Homeowners are being encouraged to use solar panels to make their homes completely energy self-sufficient.

"I get to be the mayor of the capital city of the most polluting state in the most polluting country in the world," said Austin Mayor Will Wynn. Characterizing Bush's new proposal, Wynn added: "He suggests we talk about it for two more years and save action for his successor. Well, mayors are acting now."

In [Boulder, Colo.](#), the city council last November passed what environmentalists are calling the nation's first "carbon tax." Homeowners there are facing average increases of \$16 and businesses \$48 annually on electricity bills to cover a "climate action plan." The plan is designed to make the city more energy-efficient and fund a switch to alternative fuels.

[Chicago](#) is experimenting with waterless urinals and has planted thousands of trees to cool down "heat islands" -- patches of heavy asphalt and black roofs that absorb heat and raise the city's temperature. It is distributing compact fluorescent light bulbs, more than 500,000 so far. Businesses are receiving grants for solar panels. In the Windy City's "Green Corps," ex-prisoners are being trained to assist in a range of duties from refurbishing old computers to ensuring houses are well-pressurized.

The tiny city of Keene, [N.H.](#), meanwhile, has imposed a non-idling policy for cars when parents drop off and pick up their children from school. In Portland, where carbon emissions have been reduced to 1990 levels, the water that flows through the city's drinking system is being used to generate hydroelectricity.

The District government has not set independent guidelines to reduce greenhouse gases and is still developing a broader energy-use plan. But city officials say the District has recently moved to replace some vehicles in its fleet with hybrids and passed a green act this year that would require many new buildings to meet stricter energy guidelines beginning in 2012. A measure that would require all vehicles registered in the District to meet stricter emissions guidelines is currently under discussion.

Analysts call the plan unveiled by New York City's [Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg](#) (R) last April among the most comprehensive. In addition to the greening of New York's famous yellow cabs, the so-called PlaNYC calls for 127 new projects, including an \$8 toll on cars entering Lower Manhattan -- a measure similar to traffic schemes already in effect in [London](#) and [Singapore](#), where they have proven effective in reducing congestion, cutting emissions and encouraging the use of rapid transit. New York's plan was recently endorsed by [Eliot L. Spitzer](#), the state's governor, and the Bush administration.

Released amid much fanfare on Earth Day, the plan is projected to cost hundreds of millions of dollars to put in place, much of which would be funded by state and federal grants. City officials calculate, however, that the fully realized effects would cut greenhouse emissions in New York -- which accounts for 1 percent of all U.S. emissions -- by 30 percent over the next quarter-century.

With New York's power grid projected to reach its limit by 2012 as the city adds an additional 1 million residents -- akin to cramming Boston and [Miami](#) within its five boroughs -- Bloomberg has pitched the plan as not only green, but essential to the city's sustainability.



To be sure, parts of the plan remain controversial and require the approval of state legislators in [Albany](#) and local commissions. Bloomberg has come under fire from some local leaders for effectively creating a vehicle tax that could hurt those citizens living in New York's less-affluent neighborhoods outside Manhattan and faces a serious challenge in getting it approved. But Bloomberg has also won kudos and international support -- from the likes of British Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#) and California Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) (R) -- for his green ambitions.

"The science is there," Bloomberg said. "It's time to stop debating it and to start dealing with it."

Staff writer Juliet Eilperin in Washington contributed to this report.

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