

# Climate Communications: Best Practices

## The Oregon Sustainable Transportation Initiative

The Oregon Sustainable Transportation Initiative (OSTI) is an integrated statewide effort to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from transportation. This effort is part of Oregon’s plan to reduce GHG emissions 75 percent by 2050. It aims to increase energy independence and prosperity through smart, integrated transportation and land use planning.

Transportation and land use planners and local government jurisdictions are addressing climate change through policy and infrastructure changes. Many local communities and the State of Oregon are already taking action through innovative approaches to transportation and land use planning.

Communicating about these efforts, however, can be difficult, particularly when budgets are tight and some of the public is skeptical. It can be even more difficult to communicate in order to help citizens make behavior changes. Public opinion research<sup>1</sup> shows a majority of Americans recognize that climate change is occurring, though awareness has not translated well into citizen behavior—yet. Many people view climate change as “far away” from their own lives, or they see the issue as too big and too distant. In communicating about climate change, it’s important to do so in a way that recognizes the emotional impact this issue can have, enhances understanding and provides the rationale for behavior change.



Photo courtesy the Oregon Department of Transportation

## Communicate through the benefits

A number of community and environmental benefits are achieved when greenhouse gas emissions are reduced, these are “co-benefits.” Different benefits are important to different communities and interest groups, so it’s important to know your audience and highlight the co-benefits that speak to them.

Co-benefits of climate action can include:

- Better health
- Less time in traffic
- Cleaner air
- More jobs
- Vibrant local businesses and business districts
- More opportunities to walk and bike
- More green spaces and parks
- Trails and paths connecting neighborhoods, shopping
- More transit options
- Energy independence
- Regional leadership
- Economic resilience
- Preservation of open spaces

One way to communicate the tangible changes we are making as a community (and to show the benefits) is to use local examples of climate-friendly projects (transit, sidewalks, bike lanes, compact development.)

### Communication Best Practices

Here are a few things to keep in mind when communicating about the intersection between transportation, land use and climate change:

1. **Make climate change solutions local, relevant and urgent.** Talking about effects that have already occurred or are likely to occur (changes to local water supply, the impact on local agricultural crops) can be helpful.
2. **Correct basic misperceptions.** The most common of these is the misperception that yesterday's cold temperatures or a rainy summer disprove climate change. It is important to remind people of the difference between **weather** (what we see today or during a few weeks) and **climate** (what we can measure over decades).
3. **Use clear, consistent and non-technical language.** Good communications is always about creating better understanding, so avoid technical terms—or explain them—whenever possible.
4. **Connect climate change with the economy.** While addressing climate change will cost money, it will also bring economic benefits. Addressing climate change means more efficient vehicles (and savings on gas for household budgets), more efficient buildings and houses and new, clean industries. Jobs may be created in fast-growing sectors like renewable energy and cleantech.
5. **Align messaging with supportive infrastructure changes.** Encouraging residents to walk or bike if there are no sidewalks and no bike paths means your efforts are unlikely to promote behavior change. Where possible, align your communications efforts with improvements to supporting infrastructure.
6. **Communicate through trusted, local sources and reach people through their existing networks.** People often take cues for their behavior from neighbors or colleagues. Utilizing the networks and communications channels of existing business, neighborhood, school and religious groups can be very effective.

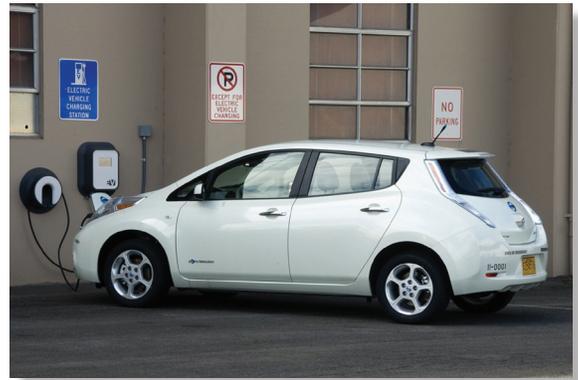


Photo courtesy the Oregon Department of Transportation

7. **Be sensitive to the emotional nature of these issues, and allow space for people to respond.** This will enable greater levels of engagement down the line if people don't feel pressured or forced to adapt to changes they are still struggling to come to terms with.

### Adapting to a changing climate

Across our state, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) is responsible for over 19,000 lane miles of state highway, 2,700 bridges, thousands of culverts, and other critical infrastructure. Oregon's road system is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Already, ODOT has experienced maintenance costs associated with an increase in potentially climate-related extreme weather events.<sup>ii</sup>



Photo courtesy the Oregon Department of Transportation

Between 1995 and 2000 approximately \$22.3 million was spent on landslide repairs along highway US 101, much of which was repair work performed under emergency conditions.<sup>iii</sup> Incidences of landslides, flooding, windstorms and other extreme weather events are projected to increase due to climate change. In most cases, the maintenance expenditures associated with things like landslides and rock falls does not go towards permanent stabilization of slopes and preventing future slides,



Photo courtesy the Oregon Department of Transportation

but only towards clearing an emergency. The more ODOT has to spend of its resources on reacting to emergency situations, the fewer funds that are available for preventing or preparing for future events.

Similar conclusions can be drawn for infrastructure in every community. Being prepared, thinking ahead, and taking steps to avert problems is wise fiscal management.

### Some Anticipated Oregon Impacts

- 2-4 feet of sea level rise by 2100, leading to coastal erosion.
- \$500 is the lost value for single truck delayed 24 hours.
- By 2080, annual temperatures are projected to increase by 2.7 - 10.4°F, leading to changes in plants, animals, and pests.
- Warmer winters mean less snow pack and more flooding.

<sup>i</sup> Shome, D., and Marx, S. *The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: A Guide for Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides, and the Interested Public.* (New York: Center for Research on Environmental Decisions, 2009), 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Interim ODOT Climate Change Adaptation Strategy Report, Oregon Department of Transportation (2011)

<sup>iii</sup> Landslide and Rock fall Program: 2012-2015 State Transportation Improvement Program Report," Oregon Department of Transportation, ODOT.