



CASE STUDY | 50By30WR CREATING COMMUNITY AND MUNICIPAL BUY-IN FOR AMBITIOUS CLIMATE ACTION

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Community changemakers in Waterloo Region have worked across municipalities to develop a unified vision and targets for climate action. After successfully advocating for their municipalities to declare climate emergencies in 2019, advocates formed 50by30WR and worked with eight different municipal councils to set the target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50% before 2030. This case study looks at how 50by30WR formed, created community buy-in, worked with municipal staff, and ultimately convinced elected officials to support setting this ambitious target.

INTRODUCTION

The Region of Waterloo is a two-tier municipality with a regional government and seven local governments. The region consists of the townships of North Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot, and Woolwich and the cities of Waterloo, Cambridge, and Kitchener. To effectively reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the region, all levels of government need to be committed to action and willing to support community action and planning.

In late 2019, local advocates spent six months working with municipalities to recognize the seriousness of climate change, leading to motions being passed by all the local governments to declare climate emergencies. These same community leaders then worked with existing regional sustainability initiatives, community organizations, municipal staff, and elected officials to set ambitious targets for climate action. Their campaign was called [50By30 Waterloo Region](#). Through their work, they successfully advocated to all eight local governments to pass resolutions to support reducing emissions by 50% by 2030 while also advocating to Ontario and the federal government to support cities in this work.

About the Organization

50By30 Waterloo Region is a grassroots, community-led citizen advocacy group that successfully advocated to 8 local governments to commit to a 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 while centering social justice and wellbeing.

BACKGROUND

Collective discussions for 50by30 began when organizers met during [Fridays for Future](#) demonstrations in Waterloo's town square. The group that would eventually make up the leadership of 50By30WR developed concrete actions to promote climate justice and raise public awareness. These included a 5,000-person demonstration in Waterloo's town square calling for climate action and a collaboration with municipal staff and elected officials to pass formal motions declaring climate emergencies. The official municipal recognition of the urgency of the climate crisis gave organizers a pathway to advocate for action from local governments.

In July 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, local community organizers launched the first 50by30WR call. In addition to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030, community organizers created a space for residents to reflect on lessons learned from the pandemic and to prioritize a justice lens in their greenhouse gas reduction work.

As stated by one of the original organizers, [Laura Hamilton](#) "COVID made us recognize that we're all related." Organizers also felt that the way communities banded together to address the pandemic and support each other reflected the capacity of communities to work together to address the climate crisis. Governments and communities demonstrated that they can make swift changes and major investments to address serious global threats. The organizers also recognized that the investments in re-opening needed to directly support climate transitions.

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The organizers worked throughout the pandemic to build momentum for their recommendations and buy-in across the region. In June 2021, a year after starting their campaign, all eight local governments had passed motions based on 50by30WR recommendations. It was a moment to [celebrate](#) and prepare for bold actions together as a community. The remainder of this case study reviews the context and history of climate action in the Region of Waterloo, how 50By30 set their targets, lessons from organizing within the community, the process of gaining staff buy-in, and working with elected officials.

CLIMATE ACTION IN WATERLOO REGION

The Region of Waterloo and local governments have set climate targets in the past. In 2013, [Climate Action Waterloo Region \(ClimateActionWR\)](#), the Region of Waterloo, and the Cities of Kitchener, Waterloo and Cambridge adopted the first [Climate Action Plan for Waterloo Region](#). The plan called for a 6% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2020. ClimateActionWR oversees the regional plans that are endorsed by the municipal councils. ClimateActionWR is a collaboration between local organizations, members of the community, and local governments led by Reep Green Solutions and Sustainable Waterloo region.

In the buildup to 50by30WR's campaign, ClimateActionWR was in the process of developing the second regional climate action plan. The region's second climate action plan, TransformWR, calls on the region to transition to an equitable, prosperous, resilient low carbon community, while reducing emissions by 80% by 2050 with a more modest midterm target of 30% reduction in emissions by 2030.

The resolution put forward by 50By3WR to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030 and to advocate to the provincial and federal government was passed alongside the TransformWR plan.

SETTING COMMUNITY TARGETS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF JUSTICE

The 50By30WR organizers knew that they needed to set realistic targets within a short enough timeframe to make the work real. Targets that weren't based in science or were outside of those recently approved by the municipalities would be difficult to gain buy-in for. At the same time, targets that were too far into the future (even ambitious ones) could lead to inaction in the short term.

The region had already set a target of 80% by 2050 but did not have a mid-term target. By setting a 2030 target, the region could start to act now to ensure that they met their 2050 goals without panicking later. Next, organizers looked at the [Paris Agreement](#) and 1.5-degree target. Based on the available science, the organizers determined that the region needed to reduce its emissions by at least 50% by 2030 to be in line with the warming target.

Six pillars were established by 50by30WR as they started to reach out to community groups to understand the impact that meeting the ambitious target might have on everyday life. These were: housing, transportation, food security, education, public health, and energy. Organizers wanted to know what positive changes could be made to the community if it focused on reducing emissions by 50% by 2030 through a justice lens. The pillars were a way to organize this work and bring groups with specific interests into the conversation around climate change.



During their initial conversations, 50By30WR considered calling themselves Climate Justice, because they wanted justice to be at the center of the work. Organizers realized that focusing on justice could have slowed down the work, but knew it was important as it ensured that the vision would be diverse and involve more collective action.

BUILDING COMMUNITY BUY-IN

As 50By30WR started to narrow their focus and work through a climate justice lens, they were able to identify a diverse list of potential partners and work with them to create community buy-in. They wanted to ensure that climate actions would not have a negative impact on parts of the community

(e.g. by deepening existing inequalities) and think about the processes of building community from a justice and social perspective.

Organizers established informal working groups for each of the six pillars that acted as spaces for community conversations. While each group maintained some core members, they also brought in different voices to discuss what taking action to reach a 50% emission target by 2030 would mean for their organization and their work within the community.

The 50By30WR team also wanted to make sure that the community was represented in their work and consulted with groups outside of the informal working groups. Organizers met with groups like the Nith Valley EcoBoosters, O:se Kenhionhata:tie (Landback Camp), The Food System Roundtable, and Black Lives Matter KW to develop a fuller idea of what a just climate transition would look like for the Region. They recognized that as a small group they could not speak for everyone when it came to the meaning of climate justice. They also recognized that, despite it being an important aspect of the campaign, developing this vision would not be perfect and would require a non-linear, iterative process.

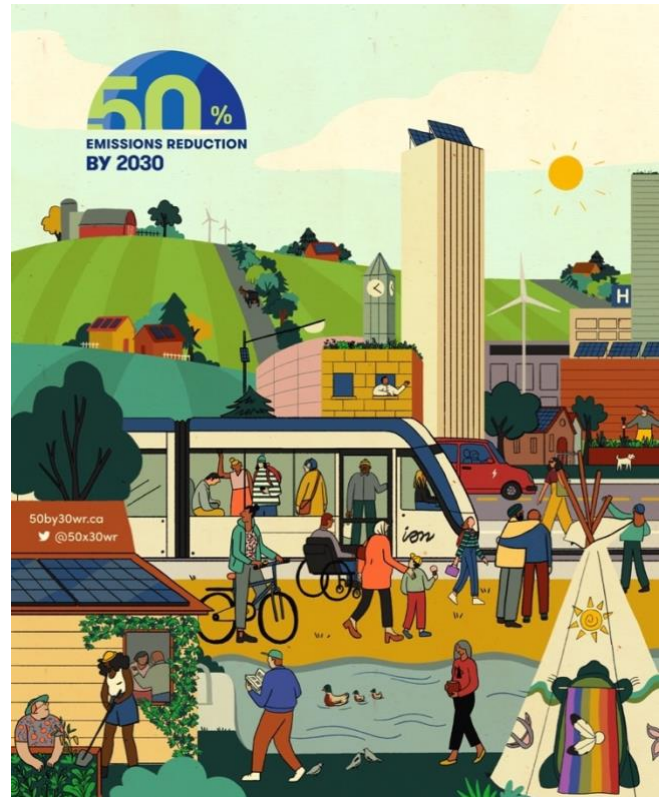
An example of this work outside of the formal discussions around the pillars and climate action is the imagery that was used in the campaign. The organizers worked with O:se Kenhionhata:tie and others to ensure that the imagery for the campaign was culturally appropriate and reflected their vision for the region. These conversations led to the poster that was used throughout the campaign and ensured that diverse voices participated as part of the delegations during council meetings where the targets were approved.

This also led to the [50x30 Champions](#), an effort to empower people to take ownership of the targets. The organizers put together talking points, with information gathered from working group conversations, and gave people the opportunity to speak about the campaign with authority. Community members then became 50by30 Champions by making videos that were shared with the community and elected officials.

Finally, the organizers used local media to raise awareness of the campaign and the need to act. They worked with the Local Journalism Initiative Reporter to publish two articles and three op-eds in the local media to shape the community narrative and to make sure that climate change stayed on the local agenda. Each op-ed focused on a different angle for what the targets could mean for the community including social, financial, and moral outcomes.

Lessons:

- A climate justice lens provides a platform for broader coalition building
- A broader coalition can help build support from elected officials



- Local media can be an important avenue for reaching the broader community

WORKING WITH MUNICIPAL STAFF

By collaborating with municipal staff to convince them of the urgency around declaring climate emergencies, community organizers gained advocacy, civic engagement and mobilization experience. They also developed connections and relationships with staff through this work, which made the next steps easier. For instance, while they communicated and met with staff frequently during the climate emergency phase, built-in trust made this less necessary during the 50By30WR campaign.

At the same time, organizers were intentional about working with the municipal staff and the individuals that were part of ClimateActionWR (the organization that oversees Waterloo Region's climate action plan, TransformWR) where their actions overlapped. They kept them informed about 50by30WR plans and worked with them to understand their work. Both groups discussed the targets they would advocate for local councils to adopt, while influencing one another's language. The outcome was that, while the TransformWR plan put forward by ClimateActionWR set a lower target of reducing emissions by 30% by 2030, they also supported 50By30WR's recommendation for local governments to set a target of 50% and their proposal to advocate for other governments to support this work. Across the local governments, the TransformWR plan and the 50By30WR recommendation were approved in the same motions.

Working with Sustainable Waterloo Region and municipal staff throughout the campaign meant that the targets set and advocated for were viewed as part of the existing work being done by municipal staff. The target was seen as complementing and advancing existing strategies rather than as adversarial.

Lessons:

- Communication with staff is important
- Build relationships and make sure that staff understand your intentions and goals
- Support the work that staff are already undertaking, while pushing for your targets
- Don't let an early no be a dissuader

ADVOCATING TO ELECTED OFFICIALS

During the climate emergency discussions, organizers held meetings with more than 60% of the regional representatives. This provided an understanding of the political landscape, offered insight into who might champion the work, and pointed to areas where additional efforts were needed to convince elected officials to act.

Between the eight local governments, 50by30WR needed to communicate with over 59 local politicians. Each elected official was sent a package with clear information about 50By30WR's recommendation. Organizers also developed a follow-up plan for everyone that wanted to meet with the team or discuss the proposal. The relationships built out of the climate emergency discussions helped to make this easier. After initial emails, several local leaders offered to move a motion and speak in favour of the motion without needing to meet directly with organizers.

Working across municipalities was also important. Organizers wanted similar (if not identical) motions

to pass, so that the work within the region would be uniform. The organizers worked with councillors and the mayor in Waterloo on the first motion, and that language was then shared with other municipalities. There were minor adjustments to the regional motion, because of scope, but the core remained the same.

Lessons:

- Trust and relationships are important – go in with an open mind, make it a conversation, and listen to their concerns
- Working with municipal governments becomes easier as you understand their structures and how they make decisions
- Understand the political landscape and knowing your champions
- You may need to address misinformation within municipalities, so research is important
- Be aware of and acknowledge existing work
- Be tactful in navigating between staff and elected officials

NEXT STEPS FOR 50By30WR

An important lesson for 50By30WR has been how a small, dedicated group can achieve a big impact when building a movement for transformative change. Though the group was modest and lacked funding, they were able to leverage relationships across community groups, municipal staff teams and elected officials to advance climate action. The organizers hope to use the lessons learned from this experience to deepen the work in their region.

Going forward, the team is focusing on advocating for accountability by monitoring how local governments implement the municipal budget processes and develop their carbon budgets; tracking and influencing the TransformWR annual reports; and shaping the public narrative on the urgency of climate action.

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Turtle Island (North America) has been home since time immemorial to the ancestors of Indigenous/First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples. Tamarack Institute is located on Turtle Island and recognizes that in this territory, Indigenous rightsholders have endured historical oppression and continue to endure inequities that have largely resulted from the widespread failure of non-Indigenous treaty people to hold up their responsibilities.

We acknowledge that 50x30WR are working on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee, Anishnawbe and Neutral Peoples. We recognize the deep intersections between climate justice and Indigenous rights and justice, with a commitment to doing our part to ensure Indigenous sovereignty and leadership is centred in the fight for a safe climate future.

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The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.