CSC Task Force Innovative Approach

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The Village of Homer has pioneered an innovative framework in creating our Climate Task Force that has shaped all aspects of our approach to climate change adaptation and mitigation. Not only has our task force been shaped by community members and government officers, but youth voices have been elevated by partnering with Homer High School’s Environmental Club. In fact, both the Climate Smart Communities (CSC) Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator are high school or college students, something we believe is unique to the Village. By engaging a greater cross-section of our community in the CSC task force, we are building a framework for lasting resiliency in the village that spans generations. Youth bring new ideas, energy, and knowledge to the task force. By involving youth, we give them a voice and a way to make change for the future that they and other generations will live in.

This process started after the Homer Environmental Club attended the Adirondack Youth Climate Summit, where they listened to a presentation about the CSC program and how youth could be involved in that process with their local government. At that point the Village had passed a CSC resolution but was not actively engaged in the certification process. Those students set up a meeting with the Mayor of Homer who then invited them to present to the Village Board. At that meeting, the students asked how they could help support the effort to become a bronze certified community. The Board said that gaining certification had been a goal for them for a few years, but they did not have enough time or resources to devote to the program and asked if the Environmental Club would be willing to lead the CSC task force. Those students accepted the responsibility and Shenequa Perry and Andrew Fagerheim stepped into leadership roles with other members of the club regularly attending and participating in task force meetings.

This approach is innovative because, as far as we know, the Village of Homer is the only municipality to give the ownership of their CSC certification process to young people. The Village has turned the reins over to the next generation, which has created progress for the Village and shown that youth are more than capable, benefits we hope other municipalities will take to heart in order to involve their own youth. We believe everyone has benefited because youth can provide the time and energy to accomplish many of the requirements for certification such as running the social media pages and website, obtaining and organizing documentation, reaching out to other entities, etc. Community members can share their experiences actually living in the Village and how their daily lives are impacted or how they could be impacted by the changes we propose as a task force. Village elected officials execute many of the task force’s plans by passing resolutions or new codes, changing operating procedures, allocating funds, etc. These three stakeholders are approximately equally represented in our task force and each play an indispensable role in our effort to obtain bronze certification.

Not only did young people kickstart the certification process, but they have helped make it a reality by contributing a significant amount of time to the task force. Members of the Environmental Club, both current and graduated, set meeting agendas, run each meeting, update the website and social media, obtain and organize documentation, prioritize which actions to focus on, research and write policies and codes for the Village Board to pass, and communicate with other entities such as SUNY ESF or the Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board for advice and help completing actions. Our Coordinator Shenequa, a graduate of Homer, has continued her work in college and was made an intern for the summer to move the Villages certification along. Young people are the driving force behind the task force and their passion has driven the Village forward in the certification process.

We believe that the benefits of engaging youth extend far beyond just immediate effects however. By engaging, training, and giving experience to the next generation of climate leaders, we are ensuring that environmental action won’t stop here, but will continue in whatever time and place the Environmental Club members are throughout their lives as well. Giving young people a voice in and ownership over the task force allows them to gain useful skills that they will take with them throughout their entire lives, and in this way the fight against climate change becomes multi-generational. Our communities will only be resilient to a changing climate when each generation has a passion for taking environmental action and the experience to make effective change. The experience, knowledge, and passion our youth are gaining through this partnership will ensure that they have the tools to continue all the work that we have done, wherever they may be, for another municipality or just for their personal actions, all of which will affect climate change and our resilience to it. Therefore, partnering with young people creates a strong framework of action that benefits us all.

We also believe that the benefits of this partnership extend beyond just Homer, New York. The members of the Environmental Club have given multiple presentations at youth climate summits to hundreds of students across the state about how they can become engaged in climate action with their municipal government. This outreach has already proved to be effective - after hearing about what our students have been doing, at least two groups of youth got themselves involved in their communities, resulting in three students getting their town's, Suffrine, and Manlius, to take the CSC pledge, and serving on the resulting task forces. We hope to promote this strategy of engaging and giving ownership to young people so that other communities can take environmental action as well. In fact, Shenequa, Andrew, and a few other young people were invited to meet with the Commissioner of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) in the hopes of encouraging other communities to include youth just like Homer, Saranac Lake, Lake Placid, and other municipalities have. After that meeting, The Wild Center, NYSDEC, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and a few municipalities including Homer created a promotional video highlighting the partnership between local government and young people in order to encourage communities across the state and even the country to do the same. While the video has yet to be released, we hope it can have an impact far beyond Homer, New York.

Engaging and giving ownership of the CSC task force to young people has been an innovative strategy that has made the Village’s hopes of becoming bronze certified attainable. Being a small rural community has its challenges, such as funding and finding the time and resources to devote to another project, but our partnership with youth has helped find others who do possess the time, skills, and resources to make certification a reality. This framework has given the Village the ability to achieve their goals without adding another thing to their already packed-out to-do lists. Not only has this partnership provided immediate benefits to the task force, but we hope that we are also building a resilient framework for lasting and far reaching climate action that extends far beyond our village.