16 cities declare crisis on climate

Coalition crosses urbanrural divide as state sees record extreme weather.

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Sixteen Minnesota cities, from the North Shore to the metro area to southeastern bluff country, are declaring a climate emergency, sending a message to lawmakers ahead of this legislative session that the time for action is now.

“We have a lot to lose,” Grand Marais Mayor Jay DeCoux said. “This is too little, too late, but this is where we’re at.”

City leaders say the signs of a changing climate in Minnesota are impossible to ignore, from never-before-seen tornadoes in December to severe drought this summer that fueled wildfires and the dirtiest air on record. With the state failing to cut greenhouse gas emissions, there is a growing sense of urgency within this coalition. Many are reaching sustainability goals at the local level, but want more state and federal funding to slow the effects of climate change.
“I have two kids that are now teenagers, and I’m just terrified about the world that we’re leaving them,” said St. Louis Park City Council Member Larry Kraft, who is leading the coalition.

The group includes Minneapolis and Duluth, which previously made declarations, as well as the first community in the state to do so — Crystal Bay Township, population 600 — in 2019. St. Paul leaders approved an emergency declaration Wednesday. With the addition of the 16 cities this month, communities declaring a climate emergency are home to 1.4 million Minnesotans.

Lola Schoenrich, vice president of the environmental nonprofit Great Plains Institute, said she’s never seen this many cities come together to make a statement that she described as more than symbolic because the partnering cities have already been doing the work. Kraft asked the institute to facilitate conversations among the coalition cities.

“The climate impacts are local, and they’re the ones that have to deal with it,” she said. “Over the past year ... it just seemed like there was more actual weather emergencies than ever.”

St. Louis Park has a legacy of leading environmental changes in the state. It was the first to roll out curbside recycling in 1984. The city is home to one of the state’s only fully carbon-neutral buildings, the Westwood Hills Nature Center, and has a growing number of sustainability policies, such as requiring electric vehicle charging stations anytime a parking lot is added or revamped and mandating the use of green building practices when developers receive public money. It’s also extending a Solar Sundown cost-share program for residents and businesses to install solar panels with upfront incentives and loans.

“Climate has become a lens in which we view almost everything we do,” Kraft said. “One overarching thing is we want the state to be viewing things through a climate lens like we are.”

Kraft left the tech industry about nine years ago to fully commit to climate activism. He supported local students who initiated the city’s Climate Action Plan, adopted in 2018. The council member said he hopes more cities join in declaring a climate emergency and commit to achieving goals like a net-zero carbon footprint by 2040 and 100% renewable energy by 2030.

Though the focus for cities remains the pandemic, Kraft wants the climate crisis addressed with some of the state’s $7.7 billion budget surplus. This week, Gov. Tim Walz proposed $940 million to go toward jobs that prevent, adapt and mitigate climate change as part of his $2.7 billion infrastructure package.

St. Louis Park and other large metro cities are better able to implement sustainable
changes because of staffing and resources. They employ full-time sustainability managers or coordinators, resources not affordable to smaller cities in the coalition.

Robbinsdale Mayor Bill Blonigan says his home has more solar panels than all city buildings combined. He wants to roll out a program for residents to reap the economic benefits he sees on his electric bill.

The city’s new $35 million water treatment plant will have solar panels, and already the city’s investment in LED bulbs has paid for itself, he said. Robbinsdale in recent years installed a $320,000 supplemental pumping system between Crystal and Ryan lakes to build resiliency against record rainfall, and it is in the midst of a multimillion-dollar stormwater replacement to better prepare for flooding in a changing climate.

Blonigan said Robbinsdale, along with St. Paul, Minneapolis and other suburbs, came together to pass ordinances banning phosphorus in fertilizers before Minnesota became the first state in 2005 to issue a ban, and since then at least 10 states have followed suit.

“We need a thing that’s systemic or institutional, that’s stable,” he said of ongoing climate action that tends to take root at the local level.

David Abazs, former board chair of Crystal Bay Township near Finland in Lake County, works with the University of Minnesota Extension. He said no matter the size, all communities have a role in reducing carbon emissions and making sustainable investments to “determine our destiny and what [we] want the world to look like.”

In 2018, the township was named Solar Capital of the Continental U.S. by the Department of Commerce with 282.6 watts per capita. The fire department and community center all have solar panels as well as many homes and farms, some of which are growing seedlings for forest restoration just south of where wildfires burned this past summer.

“It’s very real to us as we see the forest dying, the consequences of climate change,” he said.

Abazs said the most encouraging part of his small community beginning this city-level climate emergency trend in Minnesota is that the resolution was approved at its annual township meeting, meaning the 30 or so residents in attendance passed it.

When St. Louis Park unanimously declared a climate emergency Tuesday, a halfdozen residents told the council a global issue like this can’t be solved by one city alone.

“Anything you do is a drop in a bucket in our small town. It will do nothing,” one
resident said. “There is not a climate emergency that can be solved,” another said to the crowd’s applause, “Worry about getting everyone an air conditioner.”

“I wish you were right,” Kraft said. “It would be a lot easier if you were.”

Cities declaring a climate emergency this month: Bloomington, Columbia Heights, Eden Prairie, Edina, Golden Valley, Grand Marais, Grand Rapids, Lauderdale, Maplewood, Moorhead, Northfield, Red Wing, Robbinsdale, Rochester, St. Louis Park, St. Paul

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