

D I A L O G U E

HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN LEARN FROM GENERATION Z

SUMMARY

Young people are leading the fight against climate change in the United States and around the world. Thirty-two percent of Gen Zers—more than any other generation—have taken concrete actions to address climate change in the last year. Local governments and officials can work with young leaders in their communities to advance climate action by providing resources and enacting change through ordinances, policies, programs, and infrastructure development. On November 15, 2022, the Environmental Law Institute and the Local Government Environmental Assistance Network hosted a panel of youth climate leaders who shared insights about how to engage youth in climate action and their climate action priorities. Below, we present a transcript of that discussion, which has been edited for style, clarity, and space considerations.

Ella Stack is a Research Associate at the Environmental Law Institute.

Linda Breggin (moderator) is Director of the Center for State, Tribal, and Local Environmental Programs at the Environmental Law Institute.

Oscar Fox has served on the Mayor's Youth Council for the city of Nashville.

Keala Minna-Choe leads the Climate Reality Project Youth Environmental Action Pod in the San Diego Green New Deal Alliance.

Brendan Hyatt is a Research Fellow for Human Trafficking Search.

Lily Morse is Executive Director of the Green Schools Campaign.

Ella Stack: This webinar is sponsored by the Local Government Environmental Assistance Network (LGEAN), which the Environmental Law Institute (ELI) manages under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and cosponsored by the Climate Action Campaign, International City/County Management Association, Office of Mayor John Cooper, University School of Nashville, Urban Green Lab, Vanderbilt University, and Water Environment Federation. The views expressed here are solely those of the speakers.

It's my pleasure to introduce today's panelists and our moderator. Oscar Fox is a second-year student at Columbia University. Born in Nashville, Oscar graduated from the University School of Nashville, where he led the sustainability board and served as student body president. During high school, he was active in numerous sustainability projects at his school, in collaboration with the mayor's office and with local environmental groups. Now living in New York City, Oscar has begun volunteering at the West 111th Street People's Garden.

Keala Minna-Choe is a junior in high school from San Diego, California, who grew up in South Florida. She's the lead of the Climate Reality Project Youth Environmental Action Pod and the San Diego Green New Deal Alliance's youth group. She's also a board member at SanDiego350, where she helps with the Youth v. Oil campaign.

Brendan Hyatt is a recent graduate of Grinnell College. He first began researching and advocating for disability inclusion in local climate planning while interning with ELI. Brendan now works as a research fellow for Human Trafficking Search, where he researches the intersection of climate, disability, and human trafficking.

Lily Morse is a 17-year-old climate justice organizer, athlete, and student from Bozeman, Montana, and Long Beach, California. They're the executive director of the Green Schools Campaign and founder of the Climate Reality Project Youth Inclusion Coalition. They also work locally with Gallatin Valley Sunrise. Lily recently bike-packed 300 miles for Ride for Climate Justice, fundraising for environmental initiatives.

Our moderator, Linda Breggin, is a senior attorney and the director of the Center for State, Tribal, and Local Environmental Programs at ELI. She's also a lecturer in law at Vanderbilt University's Law School in Nashville, where she co-chairs the Mayor's Sustainability Advisory Committee. I'm now going to turn it over to Linda for a short presentation on why it is important for local governments to learn from youth.

Linda Breggin: I've really been looking forward to this webinar. It's not our usual ELI fare. There is not going to be a legal analysis in store for you. But I anticipate it is going to be inspirational to hear from our panelists today. I also want to add my thanks to our cosponsors for supporting this LGEAN event, which is part of LGEAN's Climate Equity for Local Governments' Initiative.

I'll start off by providing some background or contextual information. Then each panelist is going to give a short presentation, and we'll move to the discussion portion. I want to briefly discuss a 2021 Pew Research Center survey that found millennials and adults in Generation Z, as Pew describes it, "stand out for their high levels of engagement" with the issue of climate change.¹ Compared to older adults, Gen Zers, defined as those who were born after 1995, and millennials, the 1981 to 1995 crowd, are talking more about the need for action on climate change.

In addition, the survey found that among social media users, Gen Zers and millennials are seeing more climate content online, and they're actually doing more to get involved with the issue through activities such as volunteering and attending rallies and protests.² About 32% of Gen Zers have taken at least one of four actions to address climate change, including donating money, contacting an elected official, volunteering, or attending a rally in the past year.³ This is higher than Gen X at 23%, and baby boomers and older adults like me at 21%.⁴

Notably, when asked about engaging with climate content online, Gen Zers are "particularly likely to express anxiety about the future," according to Pew.⁵ Among social media users, nearly seven in 10 Gen Zers said they felt anxious about the future the most recent time they saw content about addressing climate change.⁶ These numbers are obviously concerning. But it's also encouraging that younger generations are mobilizing more than previous generations.

What we want to do here is focus specifically on how youth are engaging at the local level, and how local governments can do more to work with youth to address climate change. As we know, cities are at the forefront of efforts to both mitigate and adapt to climate change. Thousands of cities across the world have pledged to reduce their carbon footprints, including the city I'm in—Nashville—where Mayor Cooper is making efforts to reduce the city's climate footprint.

Cities are doing this in the absence of laws and regulations that require them to do so, and they did this even when former President Donald Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement.⁷ Cities stepped up and said, "hey, we're still in," and pledged to continue to reduce their carbon footprints and hit the treaty targets.

But current research indicates that cities are not on track at this point to meet their carbon reduction goals. To me, that is yet another reason cities need to collaborate with the younger generation. They really need their help. But cities are trying, and many cities have developed, adopted,

and are implementing climate mitigation and adaptation or resilience action plans—often in partnership with business communities, universities, environmental groups, and other stakeholders.

As we're going to learn, many young people are already engaging at the local level in a variety of ways, including civic and policy advocacy work, which could include serving on municipal boards and commissions, lobbying city councils, and providing input on climate action plans. There is also on-the-ground involvement that includes activities such as volunteering with local climate corps to perform adaptation work such as tree planting; building youth and education and outreach campaigns; and developing challenge programs for individual carbon footprint reduction. These are just some of the many examples.

Litigation is also in the mix, with young people bringing cases such as *Juliana v. United States*⁸ and similar cases in which they argue that government policies that support and promote fossil fuels in a variety of ways violate their rights by worsening the effects of climate change. And, of course, activism is also front and center. Protest and rallies that draw attention to the problem is an approach that certainly is being used creatively lately and is in the news quite a bit.

We want to look at how municipalities can support these efforts and learn from youth in their communities. For example, through providing a platform for youth input, listening to and responding to their priorities in their policies and ordinances, and funding and providing expertise and resources for youth-championed initiatives.

I must add that voting is fundamental to our democracy, and the numbers on youth voting are looking better and better. Per a National Public Radio story, about 27% of voters between the ages of 18 and 29 voted in the recent mid-terms, according to initial estimates.⁹ Historically, youth turnout has been closer to about 20% during mid-term elections.¹⁰ This still isn't a super high number, but it is trending in the right direction.

We're going to turn now to our panelists for their short presentations. They're going to give us some background on the key actions they've taken to address climate change, and what motivated them to engage.

Oscar Fox: I love to talk about how I got involved in conversations about climate change because I really didn't start out with that intention, and instead I sort of happened upon it. My journey started in eighth grade when my social studies class had a "change project" where you could present and argue for any change that you wanted to see enacted around our campus. Pretty randomly, I arrived at the proposal of blanketing the top of our urban cam-

1. ALEC TYSON ET AL., PEW RESEARCH CENTER, GEN Z, MILLENNIALS STAND OUT FOR CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIVISM, SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT WITH ISSUE 6 (2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/science/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2021/05/PS_2021.05.26_climate-and-generations_REPORT.pdf.

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.* at 7.

6. *Id.*

7. *President Trump Announces U.S. Withdrawal From the Paris Climate Accord*, WHITE HOUSE (June 1, 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/president-trump-announces-u-s-withdrawal-paris-climate-accord/>.

8. No. 6:15-cv-01517-TC (D. Or. filed Aug. 12, 2015). For more information, see Our Children's Trust, *Juliana v. United States*, <https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/juliana-v-us> (last visited Dec. 12, 2022).

9. Ashley Lopez, *Turnout Among Young Voters Was the Second Highest for a Midterm in Past 30 Years*, NPR (Nov. 10, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/10/1135810302/turnout-among-young-voters-was-the-second-highest-for-a-midterm-in-past-30-years>.

10. *Id.*

pus with a green roof to provide extra study spaces, a playground, and eating areas. I think I had a yoga studio on the roof. You know the eighth grader in me really just wanted my school to have an awesome rooftop view.

But as I researched and kept at it, I learned about the amazing potential of green roofs for human health, for the urban heat island effect, and for providing a habitat for the species that were being driven out by the urbanization of Nashville. So, I thought a green roof at school could be a great teaching tool for climate stewardship. All of this ignited a passion for climate and sustainability.

In my sophomore year, I hit the ground running. I set out to make the green roof actually happen. After five years of planning and brainstorming and learning so many lessons about how to make things happen, we finished the green roof. We planted it almost exclusively with plants from Tennessee ecosystems. We created a companion curriculum about sustainability to use the garden beds, to help teach the younger students at school about naturalism and climate.

And what happened as I worked on the green roof—e-mailing local professors for help, talking to contractors, and finding champions for the project all over Nashville—is that I got welcomed into a community of people who care a lot about the future of our climate, and with that, doors began to open for me. Other projects in the sustainability area arose.

I also learned a lot of practical skills about engaging in the world of adults. I learned how to write a memo, how to make a convincing presentation, how to fundraise, how to negotiate around a boardroom table, and how to write a professional e-mail. All these things prepared me for more adventures into the adult world of sustainability.

In 2020, from my spot on the Nashville Mayor's Youth Council, I got the chance to co-lead the city's inaugural Youth Climate Summit with the Cumberland River Compact, where we got to invite and hear from leaders in sustainability and climate governance. That event was so fun and inspiring, and the group that I worked with was just the best.

And so, when I learned that Mayor Cooper was creating a Sustainability Advisory Committee in 2021, I reached out to be a representative on that committee. I got to be a youth liaison of sorts. Our group got a chance to author a page of the city's climate action plan. I worked with the group from the climate summit to represent the youth voice in the planning of Nashville's climate governance.

Those are the three main things that I've done to address climate change—the green roof, the Youth Climate Summit, and the page of the climate action plan—all of which I could not have done without a huge amount of help and encouragement from young people who inspired me along the way, and adults from my school and my city who took me seriously at every turn.

Keala Minna-Choe: As for why I got into this work in the first place, I was actually born during a hurricane that hit Florida. Before I even knew what climate change was, it was impacting me, my life, and my family. I grew

up with a really large love of nature and being outdoors. Even though, coming from Florida, I didn't know a lot about climate change or what it was doing, or why exactly it was important.

When I moved to San Diego, California, I started getting very involved in climate activism, particularly during COVID. A lot of the climate activism I've done has been in many different spaces. I've been trained to be a Climate Reality Project leader and speaker. That was one of my first actions. From there, I helped found a youth engagement group as part of my local chapter. I also helped work with the San Diego Green New Deal Alliance to help spur youth engagement in coalition-building and help make sure that youth voices and youth organizations are represented at all different levels, especially within community advocacy and coalition work.

I was formerly the Youth v. Oil campaign lead, and I am now a board member at SanDiego350, which is a local grassroots organization. That is one of the examples that I want to discuss—how youth can make a difference and utilize campaigning and interactions at the local level and then translate that to a statewide level. Youth v. Oil is a campaign dedicated to phasing out oil extraction in California. Specifically, our campaign calls on Gov. Gavin Newsom, who is the person that has the ability to issue oil and gas well permits, to essentially stop issuing new oil and gas well permits and to create a just transition for phasing out oil extraction.

Notably, this campaign is very youth-based. It's pretty much all high school and early college students from San Diego. We started off passing a series of resolutions, which I'll go into in more detail later, in various school boards and local municipalities. Some of our recent work has been advocating for a bill, Senate Bill 1137,¹¹ which passed the California Legislature, got signed by the governor, and just got implemented, that calls for setbacks between oil sites and frontline communities.

We are currently working on passing a resolution in San Diego County, the second-largest county in the state of California, and, again, translating it to the state level and empowering other youth to take part in civic engagement. Something that we're doing through the Climate Mentees Program that we've created is essentially giving youth and high schools the ability to pass resolutions, similar to the ones that we passed, in their own school districts.

Going more into detail about our campaign, we first researched our topic. We drafted the resolution. We met with elected officials and board members and community representatives, figured out the key points of our resolution—what we wanted to highlight—and communicated to them why this was so important to us.

Then, we did a lot of community outreach and engagement. For example, when we passed a resolution in the San Diego City Council, we actually got more than 1,200 San Diegans to sign our petition, and displayed that in a large petition scroll to show how important this was. We got our

11. S.B. 1137, ch. 365 (Cal. 2022).

resolution on the docket and, luckily, it has passed wherever it has gone—the city, the county board of education, and various school districts. And then we’ve done media and promotion.

What I’ve learned from advocating at the city level—attending protests, organizing protests and rallies, giving public comments, talking to the media, and being a representative for youth, along with holding board positions and being a leader, and organizing at a local level, but also translating that to meeting with elected officials and making an impact statewide—is that it’s really important to find your role in the movement and figure out how your skills can best be utilized. I’ve learned that it’s really important to build connections with people, because they are your greatest assets, and to find different organizations and people that you wouldn’t expect to work with to form a coalition. That really, really helps with community advocacy and showing support on a wide level of issues.

The climate crisis is intersectional, and we should treat it as such. That’s why intersectionality is such a big component. Intergenerational collaboration is important, and utilizing adult support to help create a bigger impact and learning from previous generations. Along with celebrating wins and turning losses into opportunities. Then, most importantly, sharing your story and sharing your impact like I’m doing today to inspire others.

Brendan Hyatt: My research and advocacy work centers on disability inclusion and climate adaptation, resilience planning, and specifically local planning. I started working on this subject while interning with ELI. At ELI, I was working on equity and local climate planning. But at the same time, I was also living as a person with a disability that makes me vulnerable to extreme heat during one of the hottest summers on record in Washington, D.C.

As I was reading these plans, I became very interested in researching how people with disabilities are included in climate planning around the country. This led me, after I completed my internship at ELI, to develop and expand upon a full research project at Grinnell College, in which I interviewed and engaged with dozens of climate planners, disability activists, and resilience experts around the country, to try to create the beginnings of best practices for inclusive planning.

In the course of that research, what I and some of my colleagues found was that individuals with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to climate phenomena and natural disasters. But despite this, we tend to be excluded from climate and disaster resilience planning initiatives, and that in practice significantly exacerbates the problem and leads to very poor outcomes pretty consistently.

Exclusion has had devastating consequences, as I quickly found, during heatwaves in places like British Columbia and Montreal in recent years, where failure to plan inclusively and identify disability-related vulnerability led to devastating outcomes in practice. And looking further back to disasters like Hurricane Katrina or the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, it was very well-documented that

people with disabilities suffered in part due to oversight and the exclusion of perspectives during the planning process.

What we found is that to address the problem, climate planners really need to be proactive in working to address the vulnerabilities of individuals with disabilities in a changing climate. People with disabilities are the best experts on our own needs and vulnerabilities. So, direct engagement with resilience planners who can draw upon knowledge in planning consistently leads to better outcomes.

One of the rallying cries of the disability movement is “nothing about us without us,” and I think that statement really captures the point. People with disabilities can’t be resilient in the face of climate change if our needs and perspectives aren’t factored into the planning processes before a phenomenon or a disaster occurs.

The overarching best practice I recommend is that planners ensure that a diverse set of disability stakeholders participate and contribute during the planning process, and the best way to achieve that is by forming partnerships with local disability organizations.

Those were the key findings from my research. But since completing it, the majority of my work has been getting this message out to as many relevant stakeholders as possible. I started off by connecting with and presenting my research to the Resilient Iowa Communities (RIC) advisory board at the time I was studying in Iowa. A lot of my work was Iowa-focused. The RIC advisory board is a collection of Iowan climate planners around the state. And with RIC, I worked with members of their board and stakeholders from a couple of disability organizations that I had been working closely with to directly integrate disability perspectives and inclusive best practices into statewide best practices for climate planning documents.

Since then, I’ve also had the opportunity to write on the subject for a couple of organizations, consult a bit, and present as a panelist for the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Resilient Nation Partnership Network. One of my central takeaways from this work is that there are a wide variety of ways to get involved and contribute when it comes to climate justice and climate planning.

For me, my condition made it so that I was perhaps less likely than some of my peers to be out on the street protesting or organizing as much as I’d like to. But you can develop an alternative pathway and directly engage organizations and draw upon your skill set in ways that can have a really positive, long-term impact. So, if people aren’t sure how to get started, but they’re good at writing, or organizing, or coding, or web design, there are often ways to apply these skills and contribute meaningfully to important causes.

Lily Morse: I am a 17-year-old climate justice organizer from Long Beach, California, and Bozeman, Montana. While I was originally motivated to do climate justice work because of my love for nature, the outdoors, and exploration, what motivates me now is so much more. It’s fighting systems of oppression; working with communities around the world for justice; forming deep bonds and friendships

with fellow youth activists; and rebuilding our world and empowering other young people.

I got involved in the climate justice effort in 2019, when I first attended the Los Angeles Youth Climate Strike. In that, I was surrounded by thousands of other young people marching and chanting beside me, all caring about the same issues. I realized I wasn't alone in my worries as a young person growing up with multiple crises going on. After that, I started seeing the cause and effects of the climate crisis around me. I was commuting through one of the world's biggest ports, biking by the oil islands just off the coast of my city, and aware of the summers of thick smoke in my lungs. It became really obvious that I was going to fight. But how in the world was I supposed to do that? I was only 14. I couldn't even vote yet.

So, I signed up for training with the Climate Reality Project in the summer of 2020. Through that I gained the skills, knowledge, background, resources, and connections to be able to actually take action in my own way. Through Climate Reality, I helped establish the Green Schools Campaign, and I've been leading the campaign for the past two years. We at the Green Schools Campaign work with student groups around the country to transition school districts to 100% clean renewable energy.

We had our first big win in August, when Long Beach committed its school district to renewables.¹² That's super exciting.

Then in June, I had the opportunity to speak on a panel with some other amazing panelists, including former Vice President Al Gore, about my experience as a youth climate justice activist. Through this and some other experiences that Keala and I and some of our peers within Climate Reality were going through with the organization, we decided to found the Climate Reality Project Youth Inclusion Coalition. The goal of the coalition is to create a group of young people, staff members, and adult allies to form an intergenerational youth-inclusive movement at Climate Reality Project.

Then this summer, I had the opportunity to go on a 300-mile bike ride with my dad, and we called it the Ride for Climate Justice. We raised funds for climate justice initiatives. Most of my work is focused at more of a national level. But at a local level, I am working as an organizer with Gallatin Valley Sunrise, and we're currently working on a campaign with our sole energy provider in Montana to try to encourage them to commit to renewable energy.

Linda Breggin: We're going to turn now to the discussion portion. The first issue that I want to talk with you about is current barriers to youth involvement in local government efforts to address climate change, and what can local governments do to encourage your meaningful involvement?

Oscar Fox: In my experience, Nashville having a Mayor's Youth Council was the perfect platform for me to get a seat at the table in conversations I wanted to be a part of. A clear pathway for students from all backgrounds to have a chance to get involved with groups like that one would be a great and reliable place to start.

I'm beginning here with the immense privilege of being part of an organization like the Mayor's Youth Council, but I'd say that one challenge beyond simply getting involved is being taken seriously once you're at the table, and having your voice matter more than just your smiling face in a brochure.

One instance that stands out to me is when I was working with the Mayor's Youth Council with external corporate interests who generously sponsored our group and had essentially really wanted our input. I won't get into the story, but it was revealed that our main value add to them was the photo-op that we provided at the end of the day, and that our significant time commitments where this diverse group of young people were advising corporate sponsors on the sustainable project was really for show. That really stung for our group. I remember having conversations with friends about how that jaded them in the moment.

Fortunately, that for me was just a hiccup in a story that otherwise involved adults taking my peers and me seriously and really heeding our advice. But I did want to share that to emphasize the importance of those interactions with adults in charge, whether it's politicians or community leaders or corporate interests. Every exchange at that level informs young people about how much their voices matter, and how much they matter.

Young people know when adults engage with us in a performative way versus an authentic way. That is not to say that you should not take pictures with the young people that you work with, or that you should completely abandon visible forms of community impact. Any positive change is change. We'll take what we can get. But the authentic way that adults dig in a little deeper, and as I know, fortunately, from engaging with so many who have really properly cared, is always more impactful for both parties and often provides more fruitful results.

Brendan Hyatt: In my own, limited experience with climate action initiatives, especially local ones, if you build it, they will come. I think that there's a pervasive sense among people in my age cohort and younger that the climate crisis is hugely urgent, and that it leads to anxiety and a feeling that something needs to be done. But then, there's sort of a gap where we wonder, how do I actually make an impact on an individual level? I think that, as Oscar mentioned, creating bodies like youth climate councils or the Sustainability Advisory Committee in the case of Nashville, or on-the-ground initiatives, or whatever a locality wants to do, provides a way for us to make an impact.

Cities have a lot to gain by taking the input of young people seriously in terms of gaining energy and gaining new insights, votes, and all these other factors. But also, I think that there's a lot of value to be added because giving young people meaningful opportunities to engage with

12. Christina Merino, *LBUSD Passes Energy and Sustainability Policy to Move Toward Using Clean Energy*, PRESS-TELEGRAM (Aug. 18, 2022), <https://www.prestelegram.com/2022/08/18/lbusd-passes-energy-and-sustainability-policy-to-move-toward-using-clean-energy/>.

climate planning now sets us up to continue doing that sort of work in our careers. We are ultimately going to be the next generation of people doing environmental work and creating experiences like the ones that some of my co-panelists just described, which, I think, is going to be very beneficial in the future.

Lily Morse: Keala and I work with some nonprofits on our Youth Inclusion Coalition. I think my main thing is that we as young people have a lot of new ideas and, as everyone else said, a deep stake in what's to come. A lot of us want to get involved and make change, but finding that route to be able to make change can be a bit hard sometimes, especially when you're starting out.

Sometimes, there's not any space or voice or community for us to get involved in, so I'd really recommend that local governments give us a voice. Give us a spot on your board. Consult with us. Create a youth advisory committee and help us get into the spaces where we aren't typically invited.

My other thing is that I think various groups, and governments, and organizations think that they know what youth want and need. But it's much more effective to ask us, and it's a lot more resource-efficient, too, so you're not wasting resources doing things that don't actually matter to us or aren't actually going to help us. Then, as you're including us, it's really great if it can be in a continuous sense and not just a one-and-done photo op as other people touched on. Also, youth like to work with other youth. So, if you're going to include youth, it's great to not just include one young person, but rather a few.

Keala Minna-Choe: I'll echo everybody else's points, but add that an additional barrier is that often local governments, in the way that they're structured, are very inaccessible to youth. There is not a lot of thought in the planning and everything that makes things accessible to youth. An example would be my local city's environment committee. They meet at 1:00 p.m. on a Thursday. How can we pass resolutions through our environment committee and comment on climate change, which is a matter that impacts youth the most, if we're supposed to be in school during that time?

One of the first issues that we tackled when we were working on our city campaign for Youth v. Oil was asking the environment committee to change some of their meeting times to be later in the day to be more accessible to youth. And that's actually a program that's now been implemented at our city council. That's just one example of how there's a lack of accessibility and opportunity for youth to be able to engage with local governments, and then how we overcame that issue.

Linda Breggin: I'm going to pose one more question to the group, and then I want to give Ella a chance to ask some questions as our only ELI Gen Zer on the webinar, and then go to some audience questions.

The other core question I want to ask is about cities having large carbon footprints. They're also experiencing the impacts of climate change and frankly scrambling to

adapt and become more resilient. If you could convince your local government to take specific actions to address climate change, through mitigation or adaptation, what would you prioritize?

Oscar Fox: This answer might be a little bit minute. I know that others are more qualified to talk about more sweeping measures. But the thing that I know is green roofs. Nashville is notable in that the urban microclimate can be around 17 degrees warmer than the surrounding area, which poses a real threat to people experiencing homelessness and anybody in the urban core. That is something I care about a lot. Number one for me would be starting with municipalities, government buildings, having green roofs. I think that's a fun start, and that's my main thing. Obviously, there are many, many more things.

Linda Breggin: Yes, I agree. Although we need to make sure to pursue big-ticket items with respect to greenhouse gas reductions, such as decarbonizing a city's electric grid, those actions are not necessarily observable; whereas green roofs are something everyone can connect with, and urban heat is a very serious problem. When you see a green roof, you get excited about it and want to replicate it.

Lily Morse: With the Green Schools Campaign, we work to transition schools to renewable energy, so I would definitely go with renewable energy, especially in schools that provide amazing opportunities for students to get engaged, learn about other communities, learn about the environment, and learn about climate. And also leading that into climate justice education and an equitable access to nature.

Keala Minna-Choe: Aside from so many things, like transitioning to 100% renewables and divesting, something that is very important that I helped advocate for was pairing the climate action plan, which is something we did in San Diego, with the funding and implementation plan. So often, local governments will plan and make a lot of promises, but there is no way to see if they are actually hitting those promises. It's very hard for the public to be assured. And it really gives us assurance and the ability to sleep well at night, knowing that this climate action plan has funding and that there is a way to implement all of the big goals that we were dreaming about.

Linda Breggin: That is so important, and I'm sure you are focused on the funding that's coming through the pipeline, through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act,¹³ and through the Inflation Reduction Act.¹⁴ If you can get in early with the municipalities on how they're going to use those funds, all the better.

Brendan Hyatt: One small and very achievable recommendation, and something that Keala referred to in one

13. Pub. L. No. 117-58, 135 Stat. 429 (2021).

14. Pub. L. No. 117-169, 136 Stat. 1818 (2022).

of her previous answers, is making sure that feedback meetings and community stakeholder meetings that local governments hold vis-à-vis climate planning are actually accessible.

For example, if you hold a community stakeholder meeting in a four-story building, entirely in English, at 1:00 p.m. on a Tuesday, you've already eliminated like 60% of the population from attending. And that's going to skew the kind of feedback that you get, and it might lead you to think that things are going better than they are. It might put you out of touch with what certain groups in the community want. If you want to have an inclusive and equitable transition, you're going to have to have equitable and inclusive venues for offering feedback on that transition, and I think that's important to mention.

Linda Breggin: In fact, meaningful and equitable public involvement is the topic of a current ELI project in which we are developing a model participatory governance policy for municipalities. Ella, do you want to jump in and ask a question of this group of your peers?

Ella Stack: I was wondering if you had any recommendations for your peers and other people in Generation Z for how they can get involved in addressing climate change, including those who may be less dedicated to the effort than you all, but still want to help?

Brendan Hyatt: I think the fascinating thing about finding ways to contribute is that there are so many ways to engage, but finding a role can feel imposing, like in this more-focused local climate planning context. You can attend community meetings and offer feedback, or try to engage more directly by protesting or writing letters, or you can even intern with local government.

But more broadly, and this is something that people have mentioned, you can contribute in so many ways that I think it's important to play to your strengths. If you're a good writer, there are so many organizations where you can volunteer writing skills. If you want to do political organizing, that's something that has obvious benefits in a series of contexts. If you're a web designer, designing visually appealing web pages for organizations is an indispensable skill. I think that people should not at all feel that there are only a couple of skills that are useful in inducing climate action.

Keala Minna-Choe: Adding to what Brendan said, I think it's so important to play to your strengths because I think often within the media, a lot of the work that we've done with activism is perceived as yelling, and not working and protesting. That's a very effective form of climate advocacy, but it's not the only one. And I think that's why a lot of people often get discouraged because they think, protesting isn't for me. Being loud and speaking up isn't for me. In reality, there are so many different facets you can be a part of.

I also encourage people to try out new things. I initially did not think political advocacy and working with local

governments was for me. But once I tried it out and learned about campaign organizing, I discovered that it's my favorite thing about activism right now. Those are the projects that I'm always excited to work on. So, I'd say play to your strengths. Working in climate action isn't always what you think. But also, try new things, and maybe new opportunities will be unlocked for you.

Linda Breggin: You all are so wise. These are good life lessons—and not just for how to engage on climate issues. I want to follow up on a point I mentioned earlier, and ask that Lily and Oscar field this question. A recent survey showed that nearly 60% of young people said they felt worried or extremely worried about climate change.¹⁵ Do you have any thoughts or tips for your peers on how to stay optimistic and turn that worry into constructive action, like you all have done?

Lily Morse: I have a lot of thoughts on this. One of the things I really care about is mental health and climate justice and the climate crisis. I've been thinking a lot about this recently. Growing up in this world of crises, despair is a major challenge for people of our generation because we feel like we have no power or voice. These issues are so big, and we wonder how we are supposed to make an impact. I have definitely been stuck in that pessimism for periods of time, and the fear was essentially overwhelming my ability to dream and take action. It led to burnout and a mental health crisis. So many others I know went through things just like this.

This summer, I read two books that radically changed my perspective and really made me feel a lot more hopeful about the climate crisis: *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*¹⁶ and *All We Can Save*.¹⁷ They shifted my perspective that having to solve the climate crisis is essentially the burden that the older generations have given to us, to one that is an opportunity for young people alive today to make change and radically reconstruct our world. I'm thankful to be a young person today and contribute to that process of rebuilding. If you can shift from being motivated by fear to hope, I think that can be really, really powerful.

Oscar Fox: I agree with Lily. I will also say that I think young people would be a lot less stressed if it looked like the people in charge had their stuff together. Climate change is not a problem that we created. So, that is something that makes me feel better about things when I see people doing their part, when I see adults making these high-level decisions. When the Sustainability Advisory Committee was created in Nashville, it felt like a burden was being taken

15. Cary Funk, *Key Findings: How Americans' Attitudes About Climate Change Differ by Generation, Party and Other Factors*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (May 26, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/26/key-findings-how-americans-attitudes-about-climate-change-differ-by-generation-party-and-other-factors/>.

16. THICH NHAT HANH, *ZEN AND THE ART OF SAVING THE PLANET* (2022).

17. *ALL WE CAN SAVE* (Ayana E. Johnson & Katharine K. Wilkinson eds., 2021).

off my shoulders, that my city was doing something. That it reflects what I care about, what I know will be valuable.

I will say, though, that in cutting through the disillusionment, I have found so much peace in high school, in my green roof. You know, I was up there hauling bags of soil and gardening, and that was really cathartic. I really liked that, and I do that now in New York. That has been something that really helps me. But I'll say that, in taking action, whether it's hands-on or not, all of that has in my experience been something that makes me feel like I'm doing my part, and it does cut through the anxiety a bit.

Linda Breggin: We have a lot of good questions from the audience. I'll throw out a couple and perhaps one person can jump in for each one. One of the questions is, how important is and what role does social media play in the work that you do?

Lily Morse: Because I live in Bozeman, Montana, for me, one thing has been being able to network and connect with other youth organizers. People have asked how to get involved in rural environments. Bozeman is not rural, but there's definitely not a ton of people in Montana; it is definitely more relatively rural. I feel like I've still been able to take action on a national scale rather than at a local scale, because I've been able to connect with other young people through social media.

Linda Breggin: Here is another good question. What do you do if you live in a small town? Do any of you have thoughts on this question or on the social media question?

Brendan Hyatt: I think I can field the small town question as someone who did 90% of my work from a town of 9,000 in Iowa. There were not a lot of opportunities for rallies and protests and the like, but I think that it makes direct engagement with local government, and state senators, and people in positions of authority all the more important when you can't necessarily start a mass movement.

I also think that when you are in a small town environment like in Grinnell, there are even greater opportunities because a protest of 50 people in a town of 9,000 is a very significant, symbolic gesture. Whereas maybe that wouldn't be the case if you lived in Manhattan.

Linda Breggin: Do any of you have thoughts about how to get people even younger than yourselves involved—such as students in kindergarten through eighth grade?

Lily Morse: I would recommend some sort of mentee-mentor program, like partnering up elementary schoolers or middle schoolers with high schoolers or college students,

so you can essentially create those relationships and be able to work toward a common cause with people still young but at different ages.

Oscar Fox: I'm tempted to say that if you're really young, maybe hand it off a little bit. I feel like that's a tough burden to put on yourself. This is not to say that young people are not qualified to do things when they're young. But I know I found so much of the life advice that I've needed to do the things I'm doing today from being outside when I was a kid and being youthful. Taking every chance I could to do that.

We did just have this conversation about young people being anxious and wishing adults would do things. But they are and a lot of people are. And you know, maybe take a second. Enjoy what you can. Maybe it's silly. Also, I'm probably young to say that.

Linda Breggin: You might be young, but you're very wise. I mean that very genuinely. There are a couple more questions about how to get people involved who might not otherwise engage—such as how to get your peers involved who have a more corporate or financial focus. I think this is an important question, because we don't want to view climate activism or engagement as only for a small group of really progressive people. We want everybody engaged.

Keala Minna-Choe: That's a perfect topic because I wanted to talk more about intersectionality and combining your interests.

I understand why people say that. A career in environmentalism does not mean having a career in environmental science or doing environmental policy. Environmental law is a career that I'm considering, but I have found throughout my work that some of the most powerful advocates are people like teachers and doctors that have "normal everyday jobs." Because it shows there's a large variety, and it's not just a minority of people who chose careers in environmental work.

So I would say, encourage your peers to embrace their passions, but find ways that they can intersect climate advocacy and working with climate in their work. For example, I know a doctor that does a lot of work with plastic pollution and helps out with various environmental efforts like air pollution, because she knows what impact asthma has on her kids' health.

I think there are so many opportunities for intersections, and even going into corporate jobs allows opportunities for more environmental mindsets at wherever you're working. Don't limit yourself to specifically working in the environmental field. Try to find a way to combine your passions and integrate that into what you already love to do.