The Evolving Politics of Climate Change

Public attitudes are shifting in favor of government action. What's playing out in Salt Lake City is worth watching.

by Bob Graves | February 25, 2015

There's growing evidence that the nature of our contentious debate about climate change in America is shifting. An overwhelming majority of the American public -- including 51 percent of Republicans as well as 91 percent of Democrats -- now supports government action to curb global warming, according to a January poll by The New York Times, Stanford University and Resources for the Future, a nonpartisan environmental research group.

What type of government action the public will support on climate change, of course, needs to be sorted out. Certainly there's reason to believe that such actions will have significant regional differences. States and local governments on the coasts have garnered the majority of media

Having such a socially progressive city nested in a strongly conservative metroplex and state makes this a region worth watching to see what its people will want government to do, how actively they'll participate and what they'll be willing to pay.

While Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker says he hasn't done any polling on climate change, he feels he's engaged with its realities on a daily basis. He knows that his citizens love the outdoors and want to preserve their quality of life. "Our residents expect us to take action. Climate change fits into this," Becker explains. "There are realities on the ground and in our water and in our air that we see every day and year after year that reflect the effects we are already seeing from climate change."

A self-described "unabashed advocate for climate action," Becker has carved out a national role by signing on with Resilient Communities for America to champion leadership by local government officials to create better prepared communities that can bounce back from extreme weather, energy and economic challenges. And in 2013, he was invited by President Obama to be on a presidential task force to advise the administration on how the federal government can respond to the needs of communities nationwide that are dealing with the impacts of climate change.

On the ground in Salt Lake City, Becker's advocacy is rooted in practical projects that address subjects like improving air quality, reducing traffic congestion, shifting energy portfolios toward renewables and making government buildings more energy efficient. Salt Lake City's new Public Safety Building, for example, is the first of its kind in the country to earn a "net zero" energy rating, meaning it generates as much energy as it uses -- a project that won the city recognition from the Utah Department of Environmental Quality.

The city also has embarked on a Sustainable Code Revision Project, an initiative to incorporate sustainability provisions into zoning and subdivision ordinances. And it has developed a Sustainable Salt Lake Plan that includes an online dashboard with 12 major categories - ranging
from air and climate to energy to transportation -- to provide metrics and ensure accountability. The dashboard includes comment sections so citizens can provide feedback.

That invitation for public feedback gets at the issue of citizen engagement, and of course one of the major ways that citizens engage with their governments is at the ballot box. Like any elected official, Becker is keenly aware of the political perils of being out ahead of the public on a contentious issue.

"As near as I can tell I'm supported by our public in Salt Lake City to a very large degree," Becker says. "Maybe I'll be proven wrong. I'm in a re-election campaign year." But if that recent national poll is any sign, his advocacy around climate action will be an issue working for rather than against him.

An interview with Mayor Becker on the subject of this column is posted on the FutureStructure website.

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