

Ounce of Prevention

Advancing Equitable Climate Resilience Planning in California

status report on implementation
of Senate Bill 379 (2015)

Executive Summary

This report was prepared by



Farallon
Strategies



March 30, 2023



Executive Summary

Ounce of Prevention; advancing equitable climate resilience planning in California; status report on implementation of Senate Bill 379 (2015)

Preface

In September 2022, the National Weather Service placed the entire State of California under an extreme heat advisory. Governor Newsom remarked that “this week’s unprecedented heat wave is a painful reminder of the costs and impacts of climate change – and it won’t be the last.”



As if on cue, a few months later, in January 2023, a parade of winter storms resulted in over \$30 billion in damages and economic losses in the state.

Not to forget wildfire, between 2015 and 2020, California saw an unprecedented \$50 billion in declared losses, with over 50,000 structures destroyed.

Benjamin Franklin’s adage, *an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*, is especially true when it comes to impacts of climate change.

California’s Fourth Climate Change Assessment foresees significant impacts in coming decades affecting ambient temperature, wildfire, water supply, energy delivery and sea level rise.¹

Preparedness saves lives and treasure. According to a December 2019 study, every \$1 invested in adopting resilient building codes saves society \$11; enhancing infrastructure saves \$4 for every \$1 spent.²

The intent behind Senate Bill 379 (Jackson), signed by Governor Brown in 2015, was to institutionalize preparedness for climate change preparedness by mandating updates of municipal general plans. Cities and counties were given six years to prepare; the deadline for compliance was January 1, 2022.

So how did local jurisdictions perform?

¹ Bedsworth et al. (California Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, California Energy Commission, California Public Utilities Commission). 2018. Statewide Summary Report. California’s Fourth Climate Change Assessment. <https://climateassessment.ca.gov/state/index.html>

² Multi-Hazard Mitigation Council (2019.). Natural Hazard Mitigation Saves: 2019 Report. Principal Investigator Porter, K. National Institute of Building Sciences. Washington, DC. www.nibs.org

Unfortunately, only half of California’s municipalities complied with SB 379 by the deadline. Data from the Office of Planning and Research (OPR’s) ResilientCA Adaptation Planning Map show that only 51% of municipalities completed the main components of SB 379’s statutory requirements.³

Nonetheless, did SB 379 advance California’s ability to handle climate impacts? To answer this question—with the goal of helping adaptation practitioners—Farallon Strategies and Climate Resolve (Project Team) prepared this report, *Ounce of Prevention; Advancing Equitable Climate Resilience Planning in California; status report on implementation of Senate Bill 379 (2015)*. The grant that made this report possible was made through the California Conservation Innovations program of Resources Legacy Fund.

The report reviews the key aspects of SB 379. In particular, the stipulated compliance mechanisms of the law and how municipalities responded. We reviewed general plans, climate adaptation plans, and local hazard mitigation plans. We identified jurisdictions that did a good job and a few that did not.⁴

We also spoke with practitioners—contractors who helped local governments develop their plans as well as local agency staff. This investigation arrived at key conclusions about the success of SB 379, offered below. We also recommend policy remedies that will help with adaptation planning in California.



³ Only 251 of the state’s 483 municipalities are compliant, according to the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research (2023). The ResilientCA Adaptation Planning Map (RAP-Map). February 21, 2023; <https://resilientca.org/rap-map/>

⁴ The authors of this report have worked on numerous climate action plans, yet we avoid highlighting our efforts in order to provide an unbiased assessment of climate planning processes in California.

Conclusions

Since SB 379's adoption in 2015, and the release of related general plan guidance in 2017, adaptation practice has grown in expertise and sophistication. What was once vague and uncertain about the impact of climate change has come into focus. Today, best practices are better known. Jurisdictions are matching adaptation policies with appropriate departments. The timeframes for implementing programs and projects are better understood. Sources of funding for planning and implementation are coming available. The practice of engaging community based organizations to perform outreach is more common.

Yet significant barriers remain. Despite clearly written guidance policies, and despite the presence of MPO and COG staff members ready to help, and despite eight climate collaboratives offering assistance, and despite consultants at the ready, hundreds of California cities are currently out of compliance with SB 379.

The other major problem is that jurisdictions may have met the letter of SB 379 but largely outsourced the process to planning consultants, many of whom deliver standardized template-based plans. Check-the-box plans typically lack local context and fail to prepare city staff on how to pursue implementation programs and funding.

Smaller less-resourced communities have been held to the same standard as well-resourced counties. Small cities were asked to spend precious funds on preparing assessments of their jurisdiction's climate vulnerabilities, which we found to be largely redundant with the vulnerability assessments prepared by county or regional planning agencies.

As a way of preparing smaller jurisdictions for compliance with SB 370, some municipal planning organizations (MPOs) and councils of government (COGs) developed analyses and plans that could then be used by local governments for climate planning, yet these regional organizations are not legislatively mandated to coordinate climate adaptation planning. Nor have these regional planning efforts been especially effective, and begs the question, at what scale are adaptation assessments and planning most effective, and should climate planning take place at the city level, the county, the region, the state, or all of the above—and, if all the above, how does one divide tasks to avoid redundancy?

In the final analysis, the authors believe SB 379 has succeeded by making climate adaptation a priority for hundreds of California jurisdictions. Had there not been a mandate, local governments may not have considered climate-related vulnerabilities, nor created policies to address them. In interviews, as well as in the plans themselves, jurisdictions explicitly cite SB 379 as the impetus for action.

Based on the results of the research and interviews, the Project Team offers the following additional conclusions.

How have jurisdictions complied with SB 379?

1. **Only half of California jurisdictions updated their Safety Elements to address climate change.** Of the state's 483 municipalities, only 251 are currently in compliance. By percentage, 48% of jurisdictions are out-of-compliance. Compliance was largely a function of municipality size. Larger jurisdictions, thanks to larger budgets and an ability to access grant dollars, were (for the most part) able to mount an update. Most cities simply updated their Local Hazard Mitigation Plans (LHMPs)—which are limited in their ability to re-shape local land use and programmatic endeavors. Only 38 jurisdictions in California created standalone climate adaptation plans. (The benefits of various climate planning methods are considered below.)
2. **Most (but not all) non-compliant jurisdictions lacked the financial and staff resources to engage in planning.** Most non-compliant jurisdictions lack internal staff and resources to hire consultants to perform the climate assessment and planning exercises. Some cities still are not aware about the law and its requirements; especially because there are no clear consequences for being out of compliance. In the past, grant dollars were largely unavailable, and most jurisdictions lack the skills to craft an eligible proposal for funding. Even the state's largest municipality, the City of Los Angeles, sought outside grant funding in order to update the Safety Element. It should be noted that Los Angeles failed to win that small grant.

What climate planning approach proved most effective in yielding desired outcomes?

3. **Standalone adaptation plans were often detailed and have the potential to lead to transformative implementation projects.** But some adaptation plans were hindered by being too aggressive or disconnected from other plans. For example, in an attempt to satisfy all stakeholders the City of Oakland adopted over 400 adaptation policies. They were unable to prioritize certain actions over others, however Oakland is also held up as a model for inclusive engagement to support community driven priorities. The City is currently re-visiting resilience planning in order to prioritize implementation. Other examples show that a great plan doesn't mean climate adaptation will actually occur. Staff champions at critical points in the jurisdiction are often the best link between stand alone plans and other initiatives. Ensuring staff have the capacity to lift the policies in a stand alone plan into other discussions is critical to this approach.
4. **LHMP updates are a cost-efficient approach for SB 379 compliance, but LHMPs have limitations.** A majority of SB 379-compliant jurisdictions stated that they achieved compliance by updating their LHMP, forgoing the more intensive planning efforts of updating their general plans or developing a standalone adaptation plan. Jurisdictions unquestionably benefit from updating their LHMPs. Doing so enables them to apply for FEMA dollars, specifically hazard mitigation funds. In fact, every city and county in California should have a current LHMP. That being said, LHMPs tend to be much higher level policy documents (don't include specific projects or programs) than a general plan, nor

are they integrated into the policy frameworks of the jurisdiction. An LHMP could therefore simply be a compliance document that does not result in actual change.

5. **Updates to General Plans are more effective than other planning approaches.** Updating LHMPs does not typically entail a robust public engagement process. By contrast, updates to the general plan and the creation of adaptation plans will likely draw more public engagement. As land use decisions reside with local jurisdictions, and as general plans provide land use considerations, and as climate change will impact every jurisdiction, all localities should update their general plans to address climate change. As public health services and public works projects are typically provided by counties, it is imperative that California's counties develop integrated climate adaptation plans as well as updates to the general plan. As with other methods of compliance, this approach also relies upon well-capacitated staff to support the process and eventual implementation of efforts, however as a part of a document that is legally required to be implemented (a general plan) there is also additional incentives for a jurisdiction to ensure implementation even without a specified staff champion.



6. **Identification of disadvantaged communities** is one way local jurisdictions are incorporating environmental justice considerations in the safety element/adaptation planning; however, mapping tools and processes are inadequate in identifying the most climate vulnerable populations.
7. **Forming trusting relationships with community leaders** is key in ensuring community perspectives are integrated into climate adaptation planning.

Have jurisdictions implemented their climate resilience plans – and how?

8. **With limited capacity and limited resources, insisting on “best practices” may be the wrong approach.** One consultant suggested the idea of “best fit” over that of “best practice,” which is also reinforced by the narrative of the general plan guidelines. The perfect can be the enemy of the good when it comes to investing in resilience to climate change. In this evolving field, what constitutes “good work” is a moving target. The goal should be to create implementation plans that prioritize *feasible* adaptation policies and strategies that allow cities to track their progress in relation to specific actions.
9. **Capacity is a concern throughout the “resilience supply chain”—at the state, in local government, within nonprofits, in consultancies and academia.** OPR and other agencies have recently hired dozens of staff members to support new grant programs.

Stretched thin by long hours, seasoned adaptation professionals in State agencies have recently moved on, necessitating replacements for senior positions. As a result, there are delays in delivery of planning and grant guidelines and programs that restrict implementation dollars moving to communities on the ground in a timely manner.

In the private sector, one consultancy recently lost their entire pool of climate resilience planners, most of them moved laterally to another firm. (It matters what happens to consultants, because certain consultancies enjoy favored nation status with specific city staffers; the shuffling of deck-chairs could result in substandard plans and delays.) In academia, job postings are constant and voluminous. Nonprofits are seeing experienced employees getting poached by other environmental groups, where their new positions are no longer related to climate. With new state and federal dollars pouring into resilience and related infrastructure, many of the people engaged in this new workforce will be learning on the job. The importance of building a strong community of practice to support this work is critical to the ultimate success of this work.

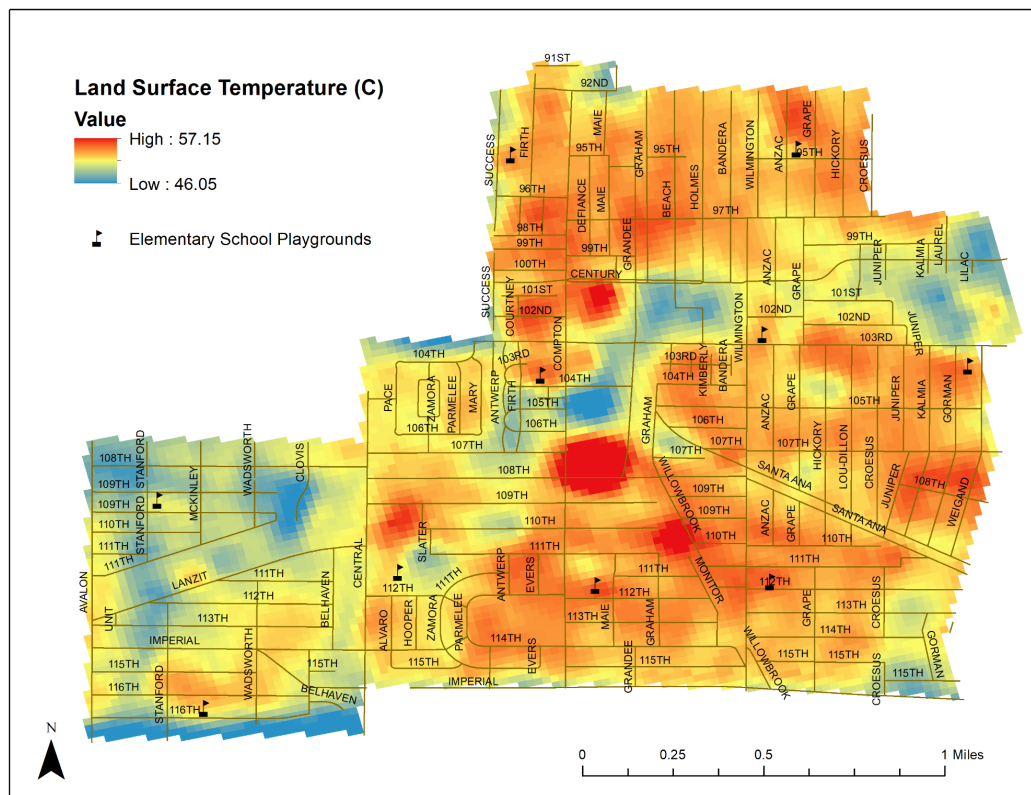
10. **It's too soon to tell if SB 379 will effectively create new implementation programs.** This report cites examples—including LA County's Safety Element that promises to limit development in the wildland-urban-interface (WUI)—but it is premature to conclude how SB 379 will ultimately spur new policies and programs. As climate adaptation will touch virtually every aspect of local government services, it'll be years before we're able to trace SB 379's influence.

What has been the role of regional agencies and support organizations in facilitating local compliance?

11. **As a rule regional climate planning efforts have not been embraced by local jurisdictions.** Even when MPO and CBO planning processes were incredibly detailed and robust, cities, generally speaking, didn't use the data. Simply, the consultants hired by cities utilized their own preferred data sources. Moreover, because local jurisdictions are focused on land use and built infrastructure, they struggled to make use of aggregated regional data to complete their plans. In the Gateway Cities, not a single city took advantage of the COG's Adaptation Toolkit, indicating that regional planning frameworks are only helpful to local jurisdictions if the regional planning organization has funding to also serve as a technical assistance provider to member cities. Programs like SGC's BOOST, that provide technical assistance, was an efficient approach to compliance—leveraging regional and state plans to create local plans that meet minimum requirements at a low cost.
12. **Consultants who wrote the regional plans used those plans.** In many instances, only the consultants that created the regional plans used that information in developing local plans. For example, Placeworks and Atlas helped write the Resilient Inland Empire plan; those efforts fed into specific city plans in the Inland Empire that the consultants later developed. However, as a rule the regional planning exercises were not embraced by local jurisdictions or the consultants working for those jurisdictions.

13. **Nonprofit support helped municipalities, but more help is needed.** Technical assistance programs, like the SGC's BOOST, helped cities complete adaptation plans, but part-time assistance is not equipped to remedy the deeper dysfunction of staff turnover and loss of institutional knowledge upon transition of staff. These points highlight several important priorities the community of practice must address in order for climate change to be proactively and comprehensively addressed at the local level. Capacity building programs like CivicSpark offer a short-term solution to building local capacity for a given climate planning initiative, but must be accompanied by a longer term commitment to building local expertise and capacity to address climate change across local departments.

What has been the role of agency staff and contractors in facilitating local compliance?



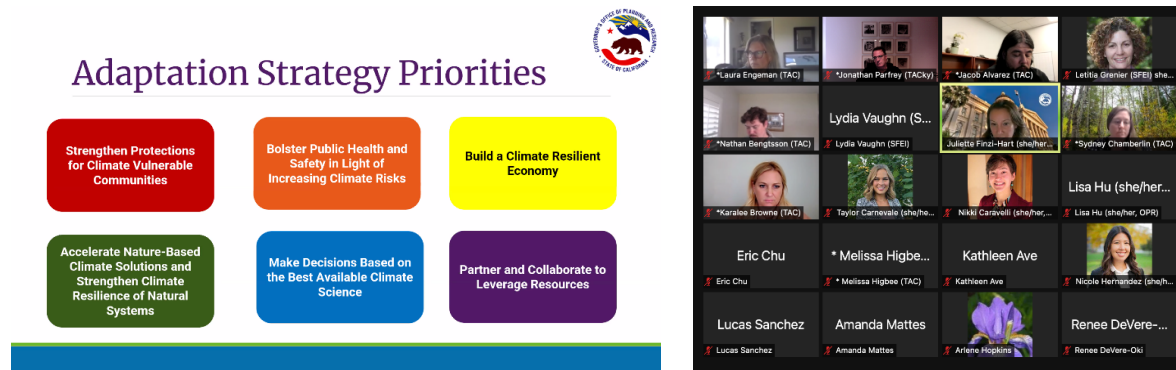
16. **Leadership is crucial.** Local knowledge often relies on a single individual to be the bearer of that responsibility. If “climate champions” within a local jurisdiction transition to a different role, the institutional memory of the organization is often lost. In the case of a consultant-developed deliverables, knowledge shifts from staff to the authors of the plan.
17. **City planners are generalists, not climate specialists.** City planners aren’t hired to be climate experts. In interviews, most planners stated that the SB 379 process, as well as the CAP process, was daunting. And especially for under-resourced, small jurisdictions.
18. **Consultants are generally doing excellent work, but there’s a trade-off.** In our effort to identify best practices and barriers, the Project Team interviewed people up-and-down the “resilience supply chain.” From these interviews, we conclude that the planning consultants were highly useful in developing assessments and plans. They produced polished usable plans. However, when jurisdictions employed consultants, cities did not necessarily gain in capacity or knowledge. As a rule, hiring consultants did not build long-term capacity within local agencies. That said, having a written record, the planning document itself, helps new agency staff have a leg up in understanding climate issues and adaptation choices. A chronic problem, staff turnover within local government continues to be a challenge for building capacity and continuity on climate matters.

Has SB 379 achieved its fundamental goal in making communities more resilient?

19. **Yes, SB 379 has spurred climate adaptation planning that wouldn’t have happened otherwise; but surely there was less preparedness planning than hoped.** By forcing jurisdictions to update their LHMPs, cities and counties are better prepared for climate impacts, and updating LHMPs will also help municipalities pursue federal hazard mitigation funding. That said, half of the State’s jurisdictions failed to document compliance at any level. Many of these local governments face considerable constraints in fulfilling the planning mandate, let alone actually implement programs suggested by these plans. Some jurisdictions, including the ones interviewed for this report, found ways to fund the planning effort or were able to leverage staff time and outside resources to creatively meet SB 379 requirements, such as leveraging the SGC BOOST TA program. However, as noted elsewhere, simply updating LHMPs and referencing them in a general plan, is not sufficient to actualize climate resilience in their communities.
20. **General plan updates and standalone adaptation planning processes yielded useful outcomes.** The municipalities that complied with SB 379 generally found the planning process useful. The process that municipalities undertake to become compliant entails many measures, including data collection, assessing community vulnerabilities and risk, developing strategies to mitigate risk, and identifying implementation measures and funding priorities. Altogether these exercises helped practitioners recognize the compounding impacts of climate change and the importance of addressing climate risk across plans and departments in a jurisdiction.

Recommendations

We offer four key overarching recommendations on how the State of California may provide funding and guidance to best achieve resilience outcomes. These are 1) address the crisis of capacity, 2) create efficiencies of scale, 3) fund climate planning at the local level, 4) encourage robust climate adaptation plans.



Address the crisis of capacity

At every level of planning and implementation – from state agencies to local governments, from consultant firms to community based organizations – all of these entities are facing severe capacity constraints. The following are the Project Team’s specific recommendations pertaining to addressing the crisis of capacity:

1. **Invest in workforce development and retention.** The federal government, State, and all subsidiary levels of governance should invest in workforce development and retention. Climate impacts are manifold and promise to upend how government operates. Skilled practitioners are needed to plan for these changes. The State of California should invest in AmeriCorps workforce development programs, such as CivicSpark. Senior municipal workers should be retained with special incentives, such as tax credits.
2. **Amend legislation to allow municipalities to complete their vulnerability assessments by reference to regional or statewide climate analyses.** Local government staff would have more staff time to focus on the implementation of projects and programs if the State and regional organizations/agencies (e.g. councils of governments) performing these expensive and noncontroversial analyses local governments will have more staff time to focus on the implementation of projects and programs (see Recommendation #3) and gain a high-level understanding of the climate hazards impacting their region.
3. **Provide block-grant or other sustainable funding for plan development.** Local capacity is so constrained that most municipalities do not even have the capacity to write and submit competitive proposals. Block grants or formula grants - as opposed to competitive grants that have onerous requirements- to councils-of-government and planning dollars to local governments on an “as needed” basis would help local governments meet statutory

requirements. The State could provide block-grant or other sustainable funding for plan development.

4. **Support existing climate collaboratives and technical assistance programs.** The State should allocate funding to the Office of Planning and Research or the Strategic Growth Council to support existing climate collaboratives, such as those represented by the Alliance of Regional Collaboratives for Climate Adaptation, as well as other statewide and regional technical assistance programs, which build capacity through peer learning, resource sharing, grant support, and joint policy and program development. In some regions where there are several climate collaboratives operating at different scales (e.g. Bay Area has several regional and countywide climate collaboratives), climate collaboratives must strategize how to work effectively across scales to ensure they are not requesting too much time and resources from low-capacity organizations to participate.
5. **Grantmaking agencies responsible for distributing climate adaptation and resilience funding should implement the recommendations of “Climate Crossroads: California’s Readiness to Act on Climate Resilience” produced by the California Resilience Partnership** including: 1. Overhauling existing grant programs, 2. Increasing core capacities across the community of practice, 3. Provide set asides for community based organization leadership, 4. Deferring to regional self organization for greater impact, 5. Utilizing existing policy and program levers, 6. Make it easier to understand the impact of the various funding programs.

Create efficiencies of scale

Planning for climate change is essential. However, there is such a thing as over-planning. We found that some regions repetitively write climate assessments, arriving at the same conclusions. The State has a role in creating efficiencies in adaptation planning and implementation by appropriately designating climate adaptation work across scales while allowing regions to self organize to support greater impact.

6. **Distribute adaptation planning work appropriately between local and regional level.** The State, via the Strategic Growth Council and the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, should provide funding for regional organizations or climate collaboratives to conduct landscape assessments that help identify regionally-specific governance structures, and fund each of these levels of governance to work together on joint planning and implementation initiatives. By supporting the development of regional vulnerability assessments and plans, the State can reduce the planning mandates on individual municipalities thereby allowing jurisdictions to focus on more narrow plans that advance specific resilience projects and programs. Rather than engage in planning to check-a-box, we wish to see local jurisdictions focus on land-use choices, which are clearly within their scope of authority. As well as update their plans to make climate adaptations that are feasible and implementable.



7. **Provide specific plan alignment guidance.** The State should provide specific plan alignment guidance across general plans, local hazard mitigation plans, climate adaptation plans, and local coastal plans. The State should update guidance to align with the competing and often contradictory timelines of other related planning requirements. The guidance should take into account the life-cycle of plans. If completed through an LHMP process, compliance should factor in the differences in 5 yr vs 20 year life-cycles of plans, CEQA, and other various issues that create compliance issues with LHMP led efforts. Specifically, the Adaptation Planning Guide should be continuously updated to respond to the emerging community of practice and provide better guidance for practitioners and consultants working in this space.
8. **Develop effective partnership models.** Partnership models at the local and regional level should be evaluated and shared to 1) enable local governments to contract with community based organizations to develop a community-driven planning process and lead public engagement, and 2) allow for local jurisdictions and community based organizations to effectively contribute to and guide regional planning processes without draining resources and capacity.
9. **Designate review authority of SB 379 compliance to the Office of Planning and Research (OPR).** The State should hold jurisdictions accountable for meeting requirements to implement plans by providing the State Office of Planning and Research with review and approval abilities, like is already done for local hazard mitigation plans through the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services. CalOES is informally reviewing plans for compliance now, and it is resulting in plans meeting specific LHMP requirements, rather than comprehensively addressing climate adaptation in the long range general plan for local governments.

Fund climate planning at the local level

The recently established Adaptation Planning Grant Program, with \$25 million at its disposal, will likely help a number of California jurisdictions comply with SB 379. But funding will fall short of underwriting the planning processes for all 232 cities and counties that are currently out-of-compliance, and this is without considering the cost of implementation of planning. Additional state and private philanthropic funding are needed.

10. **Renew OPR's Adaptation Planning Grant Program.** The State should renew the Adaptation Planning Grant Program at \$15 million per year, and do so indefinitely as plans will need to be updated as climate threats rise in severity necessitating an adaptive approach to climate planning.
11. **Allow flexibility in funding toward local climate planning.** The State should allow other climate planning requirements to fund planning efforts that will satisfy SB 379. The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) rulemaking, R.18-04-019, tasks the state's investor-owned-utilities (IOUs) to perform climate change vulnerability assessments and climate adaptation in disadvantaged communities,⁵ among other climate impact planning efforts.⁶ Unquestionably, electric service is crucial during extreme heat and wildfire events. As such, utility coordination with local jurisdictions is crucial. Therefore, CPUC should allow for a rate case that allows IOUs to send dollars to local jurisdictions to co-develop local climate plans. A second example, the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) could take a more proactive role in awarding planning dollars for local jurisdictions to prepare LHMPs that are specifically designed to address longer range climate considerations than the typical five year LHMP planning horizon.
12. **Renew funding for SGC's BOOST Program.** The State should renew and expand funding to provide ongoing technical assistance to local jurisdictions, as well as help local governments navigate the resources available to support planning and implementation.
13. **Leverage private philanthropy.** The Bay Area Council's California Resilience Challenge⁷ and Southern California Gas Company's Climate Adaptation & Resiliency Planning Grant Program⁸ have awarded millions of grant dollars to local jurisdictions to perform planning and research. Southern California Edison is supporting Climate Resolve's Ready for Tomorrow program that assists local jurisdictions on their climate planning activities. Resources Legacy Fund should strongly consider convening California funders – especially

⁵ California Public Utilities Commission (2020). *Decision On Energy Utility Climate Change Vulnerability Assessments And Climate Adaptation In Disadvantaged Communities (Phase 1, Topics 4 And 5)*.

<https://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Published/Go00/M345/K697/345697117.PDF>

⁶ California Public Utilities Commission. *Climate Adaptation*. Accessed November 29, 2022.

<https://www.cpuc.ca.gov/industries-and-topics/electrical-energy/climate-change>

⁷ Bay Area Council Foundation. *California Resilience Challenge Fund*. Accessed November 29, 2022.

<https://resilientcal.org/>

⁸ SoCalGas. *Climate Grant*. Accessed November 29, 2022.

<https://www.socalgas.com/sustainability/sustainability-at-socalgas/climate-grant>

community foundations – to highlight the need for equitable community-driven climate adaptation planning.

Encourage robust climate adaptation plans



Of the three approaches to SB 379 compliance — 1) updating the jurisdiction’s general plan, 2) updating the local hazard mitigation plan (LHMP) and 3) creating a standalone climate adaptation plan — larger municipalities should perform all three, while smaller jurisdictions may elect to update their LHMP. The Governor’s Office of Planning and Research should encourage jurisdictions to develop robust-as-possible plans as finances and capacity allows.

14. Large jurisdictions – counties and cities with populations greater than 150,000 people – should develop a standalone climate adaptation plan that harmonizes with the jurisdiction’s sustainability plan, general plan and LHMP, among other planning documents.
15. Mid-sized jurisdictions – with populations ranging from 80,000-150,000 – should update their general plan to account for climate impacts as well as update their LHMP. Particularly vulnerable mid-size jurisdictions should further consider standalone climate adaptation plans.
16. Small jurisdictions – with fewer than 80,000 people - should utilize external resources provided by their county or COG, technical assistance programs, or pool efforts with nearby

jurisdictions to comply with SB 379 via LHMP integration approach. The exception would be highly at-risk communities, which should still consider conducting a stand-alone adaptation plan or comprehensive safety element update

17. Regional plans may prove helpful in the future. Climate assessments, if developed regionally and allowed by statute to satisfy SB 379 at the municipal level, cities and counties would more likely use these regional frameworks, and as a result, create regional alignment around shared priorities and policies that could be implemented through shared agreements or other collaborative constructs.