

threesixtyCITY, Episode 54

Community Climate Transitions with Mary Jane Patterson, Tova Davison and Laura Schnurr.

[Mariana Lebrija]

My name is Mariana Lebrija, and I'm your NewCities host.

On today's episode, we're doing things a little differently. Instead of jumping straight into a conversation with one of our inspiring guests, I'm going to tell you a *story*.

Over the past few weeks, I've had the chance to sit down with a few different leaders based in the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, Ontario, in Canada to hear how the community is coming together to develop an ambitious climate action plan. Throughout the episode, you'll hear the voices of Laura Schnurr, from the Tamarack Institute, Tova Davidson from Sustainable Waterloo Region, and Mary Jane Patterson from Reep Green Solutions. So let's get into it.

As many of our audience members probably know far too well, the global Climate Crisis is demanding urgent action and collaboration from all parts of society, and the impacts of climate change are already being felt across the world.

As part of this, it's especially important to recognize that often the most negative impacts are felt by the communities and individuals who have contributed the least to the human-driven causes of climate change. Typically, these communities also have the least access to the resources, strategies or support that might help protect them against the physical, economic, and humanitarian consequences.

But, today, rather than focusing on the multifaceted and often overwhelming factors that contribute to such a complex problem, I'm very excited to be sharing a story of hope.

So sit back, and get ready for some optimism, as I walk you through my recent conversations about Community Climate Transitions: the name of an initiative that was born out of the Tamarack Institute in Waterloo, and is accelerating the pace of community-driven change that is happening across Canada.

We had Laura Schnurr, from the Tamarack Institute, explain the program:

[Laura Schnurr]

We basically support community changemakers to develop skills and capacity in the areas of collective impact community engagement, collaborative governance, community innovation, and evaluation, all of which we found to be essential ingredients to doing local systems change work successfully. [...] So concretely, we offer Communities of Practice coaching, peer learning opportunities, case studies, and publications, webinars, and workshops and so on

In 2022, this program is being offered to a cohort of 19 different communities, each of which went through an initial application process before embarking on their 10-month journey in February.

[Laura Schnurr]

And basically, these communities, these 19, they've each had their own teams locally that comprise two to nine individuals. And they've been going through these monthly sessions that we've hosted, we've been bringing in different speakers looking at different themes. They've been accessing coaching with Tamarack coaches on our interrelated practices that contribute to that community change. They've been doing homework assignments, meeting regularly as a group to debrief on what they're learning and apply it locally."

For context, the Tamarack Institute was founded in 2001 with the goal of ending poverty. After decades' worth of working with communities on poverty reduction and seeing success in their models, the Institute has developed communities of practice around various issues, which brings us to the topic of today, their Climate Transitions cohort.

I asked Laura why she personally got involved in this space, which allowed us to discuss the many overlaps between this massive environmental concern and the overflowing social and political issues that come along with it:

[Laura Schnurr]

For me, climate change is arguably the issue of our time; humanity is facing an existential threat. And our generation is both the first to be fully aware of the threat that it poses, and also the last to be able to act in time to avert dire consequences. So it's really a perfect example of a complex, thorny challenge that requires deep collaboration and as systems change lens - we can't solve it without multi sectoral partnerships and community engagement, where all major actors within a community are working together.

And Tamarack as an organization has been focused on social issues, including reducing poverty. So I think it's really interesting because, the last couple years, we've seen a big shift in the climate movement in Canada and abroad, from climate action to climate equity and climate justice. And that was an essential shift that we needed to see because the climate crisis is so multifaceted. It's so deeply intertwined with other issues like food security, poverty and inequality, decent work, mental health, housing, affordability, community belonging, and so on. And tackling the climate crisis does not just mean reducing emissions and getting to net zero. It's about so much more.

So, how do we even begin to *approach* such a massive and complex issue? Through the Climate Transitions program, the Tamarack Institute is bringing together cohorts of multi-sector actors to begin tackling these questions, through an approach that emphasizes the need to work together and to move towards common goals. At the heart of this work is the idea of "collective impact" :

[Laura Schnurr]

Collective impact is about a whole community approach to change. So it's about getting local governments, community organizations and nonprofits, businesses, schools, volunteer groups, and residents, particularly those with lived and living experience

tackling the issues you're looking to solve around a table and collaborating. So it's not a loose form of collaboration, but a deep one built on trust, where partners come up with a shared vision for change they wish to see in their community, and they come up with a common action plan for getting there.

All of the individual organizations that are involved in a collective impact initiative, are then contributing to a common agenda. They're all measuring progress in the same way, thanks to a shared measurement framework

So, in part, the work of the Tamarack Institute is essentially to provide a sort of backbone infrastructure that coordinates these efforts and offers support and leadership. At the same time, Laura emphasized that a lot of the powerful work is *already* being done by all sorts of different actors on the ground, including activists, community groups, nonprofits, and volunteers. These are the types of people she's been working with, as part of the Climate Transitions cohort.

My next conversation was with two women who take part in this group:

[Mary Jane Patterson]

"I'm Mary Jane Patterson, and I'm the executive director at Reep Green solutions. And Reep is an environmental charity serving Waterloo region and beyond."

[Tova Davidson]

I'm Tova Davidson and I'm executive director at Sustainable Waterloo Region. We are a self sustained social enterprise, nonprofit. And we work in the areas of sustainability for business and community levels.

Over the past few years, the two leaders joined forces to spearhead a Climate Action Plan for the regional municipality of Waterloo, and they were able to get eight municipalities in their area to formally adopt their plans.

[Mary Jane Patterson]

The collaboration between Reep Green Solutions and Sustainable Waterloo Region really began quite a while ago now around 2010 or 2011. When the executive director at that time of sustainable Waterloo Region approached me, I was at reep already at that time, and the sustainability planner at the region and said, Why don't the three of us get together and create a climate, you know, get our community to create a climate action target and plan. So we've been working together For a long time - at first it was a student group that was engaged to take a look at other plans across Canada and fill us in on what's been going on for other municipalities and other communities. And then we got to work with some funders. And then we started working with our municipal partners on a target and a plan to reach that target. And that was the work of several years. And it was the first one plan. And we've been working together ever since, as the two nonprofit co-leads for the climate action plan for Waterloo Region.

So, when the Tamarack Institute kicked off their Community Climate Transitions cohort in early 2022, Climate Action Waterloo was getting ready for the second iteration of their Action Plan:

[Tova Davidson]

Transform WR was started as a strategy after we had already gone through the process of doing consultation with the community, municipalities, government etc., To set a target. So our long term target is an 80% reduction in our carbon footprint by 2050. So that's our long term target. And then we decided we needed a plan to do that - a target means nothing with no plan. [...] So the four pillars of the plan are that we need to do four transformational changes in our community. The first is we need to transform the ways that we move. And that's people as well as goods. The second is that we need to change the way we build and manage our buildings. And that's big business buildings, residential buildings, all of our buildings need to change - new buildings being built as well, as the existing stock. The third change is that we need to change how we make produce and waste, including food systems. And the last one is that we need to change, we need to transform, how we relate to each other. And so the Waterloo Region plan actually does try to integrate the just transition - that we are creating an equitable, prosperous, resilient, low carbon future. It's not just about low carbon. It's about equity and justice. And, Jay, do you want to dive a little deeper?

[Mary Jane Patterson]

Yeah, yes, I do. Thanks for setting it up to Tova. [...] for the final piece, transforming the ways we relate, it's a firm commitment that we take a look at the impact on equity of every action we take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, [...] there was some excellent community consultation done. And I remember hearing the feedback from all that consultation, which was translated into our vision for our community. [...] It was, I thought beautiful, this vision of the community that we have - *neighborhoods help people meet their unique needs and thrive close to home. We're a community that knows we're not separate from the planet.* All the pieces of that, I thought, were an excellent beginning to this. [...]. And Tova and I remember that community consultation very well, because we went out everywhere, with a big board that had a kind of continuum on it in a kind of neat graphic of where we feel we are right now and as a community, visually, and the kind of community we want to become. And we invited people to tell us - what does their future look like? Where would they want to be on this continuum? And we were surprised at how ambitious and thoughtful people were, I think, about their future.

[Tova Davidson]

Just to add a little something I couldn't agree more and I'm so glad you pulled that up, MJ - that vision that came from the community: that they understood that a low carbon climate ready community meant inclusion, meant belonging, meant support, meant a better life... that this wasn't just about, oh, we're going to give stuff up for a better planet. No, it actually means a better life.

A better life. And these notions of inclusion, belonging and support are not just *outcomes* of a climate-ready community, but they're at the very heart of the transformations that will get us there. And the more I spoke with these women about their work, it became clear that the principles of equity and inclusion were embedded into the Action Plan in Waterloo itself, and that the leaders were doing their best to capture *everyone's* voices and to truly build and strengthen a community, including people who didn't necessarily have experience working on topics of climate:

[Tova Davidson]

We didn't want to just speak to the other greenies oftentimes, and you get in an echo chamber and we knew this was a community plan for everybody. So instead of trying to draw them to our events, we went to their events.

Tova told us a few stories about going to hockey games, rodeos, even a MoPar event, with muscle car enthusiasts... She laughed as she thought back on these memories, saying many of them took her out of her comfort zone but allowed her to talk with a lot of interesting people who ultimately wanted to know more about the Action Plan too:

[Tova Davidson]

So we really did try to go multifaceted, and try very hard to not just stay in our echo chamber and all of our friends and the other environmentally minded folks in the region.

And apart from going out to different events and trying to get people involved with different *lifestyles* and *interests*, the women also emphasize the need to focus on equity, which the community members themselves have also been calling for:

[Mary Jane Patterson]

Equity was really emerging throughout the whole consultation process as a key part of this climate action strategy that nothing should be done that decreases equity. And in fact, all aspects of this should reinforce and improve equity in our community while reducing greenhouse gas emissions. And we wanted to really take a look then at what we had created with new eyes, and we put out a bid for inviting people, equity knowledge holders, to come to take a look at this to review it. So we hired them, as consultants, professionals, there are four different ones from different perspectives, indigenous, different racialized groups who took a look at this plan that we had created and gave us feedback on the whole thing. And we then embedded that into the plan as well. And it was really helpful. I think it made a difference, the big difference to the final version of the plan.

Listening to these women speak, I couldn't help but think back to Laura's definition of collective action, which she said represents a deep form of collaboration, and one that is built on trust. It came up a few times as Tova and Mary Jane reflected on their own journeys:

[Tova Davidson]

I understand that we are a rarity in Waterloo Region, that our climate action plan is owned by two local nonprofits led by two local nonprofits funded by and supported by the municipalities. But that is two independent organizations representing community that has taken this forward. And that that allows for it to be a community plan. And so when we do that community outreach, it's not the municipalities asking the community, what do you want? It's the community asking the community, what do you want? And that's been really unique, but we get a lot of questions, and I get them even when I'm not in the room about so how is it co running a program? That's a big question mark, people ask us because we are two executive directors of two independent organizations co running a program. And I at the beginning of this recording said that MJ was my work bestie. And one of the things I would say that's absolutely true, we see each other almost every day. But that that working relationship of learning with whomever you have to partner with, to

get to know them, to trust them, to build the working relationship where things can be disagreements, but it doesn't mean that we're not in it together. That is so pivotal, and foundational, this is a problem that's going to take people working together. And it's going to take a solution that integrates everybody's way of thinking and that incredibly strong working relationship, like it's actually co managed, our staff is CO managed. It's very unique. And I don't know if I've ever had a relationship like this with another organization and there are many times where MJ and I will say, I'm so glad we're in this together. Because sometimes we really need each other. So to take that away for other groups to say, build those relationships. Don't just think about the business. I think about the human side too, because it's a human problem that'll need human solutions.

[Mary Jane Patterson]

That's well, that is a great start Tova. And I think that trust is a really key part of what you said, I think and working through difference together, trusting that we really we respect the perspective each other is bringing and we'll figure this out. And I think I could kind of go out kind of branch out from there and say how neat it's been to see our municipalities working together on this over the years, the growing commitment, And it is it really is a journey. And we're all I guess, working together to help that understanding spread through all of us working together on this. And I think it brings me back to **trust**.

So how do we *build* that trust? Or rather, is it as simple as these stories make it seem? Laura and I were able to discuss this in more detail:

[Mariana Lebrija]

You were saying that the deep form of collaboration is built on trust. But I was wondering if lack of trust is ever a barrier, when you're trying to bring together so many different actors?

[Laura Schnurr]

Yeah, it's definitely an important issue; doing deep, collaborative work takes time, and relationships move at the speed of trust. Some communities have had very ambitious timelines in mind. And I think they're having to adjust those timelines, because they're realizing that trust is going to take time to build.

[Mariana Lebrija]

Yeah, I think we could get into a whole other conversation about the timeline aspect. And that tension that exists when you need to invest time in building trust and moving slowly towards that goal, but then also seeing the urgency of a lot of these issues. And sometimes I think people lose hope because of that. But it's still just so important and valuable to invest that time and be somewhat patient even when these issues require immediate action.

And I'm really curious, I guess, on a personal note, if you ever feel that pressure, you and your team in general, when you're guiding others through problems and issues that

are really complex, and there's not really a clear cut solution. Do you ever feel like you almost need that coaching to be able to guide them through it?

[Laura Schnurr]

That's a great question. I mean, I think we all need support, right? I think part of it, this cohort process, for me has been learning from others, learning about the actions being taken, brings me hope. So I see what's going on in communities. And I feel like change is happening. And that all these little efforts - little and not so little - big efforts too, are combined, are going to help us achieve this transition. And I hear this from some of our climate cohort members who have said their local group that they formed to take part in this journey, has in itself become a support group for one another, and just how much they love one another, was the words that were used. And I thought that was so powerful, because we need community connections.

The Community Climate Transitions program is not only providing *coaching services* and *advice* on how to make change possible at the local community level. It goes beyond that, and makes up its *own* community, allowing these representatives of the 19 different groups to find a sense of unit and belonging - not only sharing in each other's frustrations, but also learning from each other and providing that crucial sense of hope. The ladies at Waterloo agree:

[Tova Davidson]

I think the Tamarack work in this collective that's come together to work on climate change has been a really interesting learning because there are different people in different contexts, different organizations. And in the way those organizations are made up. Some are small, grassroots community groups, some are municipalities that are doing the lead, and what are we learning from all of them and all the different ways that we can engage? Because it sometimes feels like you're all alone out here trying to figure out how to change a whole community. And so that connection to Tamarack, to allow us to talk to other people who are addressing some of these issues to understand and learn from them to be inspired by them has been really great.

[Mary Jane Patterson]

I agree with that. And I think that we're all really curious about what's going on in other cities and other communities across Canada across North America. I've really enjoyed that ability to connect with other communities all across the board. [...] it's just really cool to be able to compare notes, you know, talking about how we've got really great municipal support, we're wanting to get more community people and hearing from them that all we've got is community, people were trying to get the municipalities to the table. So it's just so interesting to see how this is happening in different contexts all around the world. And to feel part of it, I think, is supportive, really helpful. Because [...] sometimes you're you feel like you're knocking your head against a wall. And we're not alone in that, we're all trying to figure it out.

[Mariana Lebrija]

Definitely; it's one global problem. And then, in every specific community, it's experienced differently, and then approached differently. But still finding that unity and hope, I think is very important to keep moving forward ...

At the beginning of this episode, I drew attention to the human dimensions of all of this, in order to point out the sad reality that most of the negative impacts of climate change are typically felt by the communities and individuals who contribute the *least* to systemic drivers of the problem.

As overwhelming and discouraging as it may be to understand the social issues and inequalities that become so entangled with the already-troubling scenarios that are affecting our planet, my conversations with Laura, Tova and Mary Jane made a strong case for the human side of these issues to be seen as an *antidote* to many of these anxieties.

Their stories are proof that intentional and collaborative planning can also work towards making communities more just, equitable, and resilient.. They show how humans can truly lean on each other, support each other, and create a large family and community that is equally motivated to bring about positive change.

And it's not just about placing these responsibilities entirely on the shoulders of the community sector - it's about lifting each other up and joining forces, *leveraging* the power of community to work *with* their governments and enable the types of policy and public commitments that we need in order to protect our planet.

And that's why fighting for a better planet really means we're working towards a better life.

So what can listeners do to tap into these sources of hope, or to contribute to the types of change that we heard about on today's episode? We have a quick message from Laura:

[Laura Schnurr]

I would invite everyone listening to check out our work, we are launching another cohort of communities in early 2023, and opening up the invitation to apply at the beginning of November. And we'd be really thrilled to work with communities who are passionate about engaging their community and working across sectors to tackle this challenge, and also tackling the climate crisis through multi solving lens and really putting equity and justice at the center of their work. So we'd love to answer any questions, or be in touch with anyone who's interested in the work we're doing.

You can find links to the Community Climate Transitions program in our show notes. We've also made sure to share information about Reep Green Solutions, Sustainable Waterloo, and Transform Waterloo Region for those of you who want to learn more about these organizations and the region's Climate Action Plan, including their vision for 2050, their path to 2030, and all of the actions that are needed to make it all possible.

I want to wrap up by giving a big thank you to Laura, to Mary Jane and Tova, and to everyone who was involved in our initial conversations.

Thanks to all our listeners for tuning in, we'll be back next week with another episode of threesixtyCITY.