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Toronto Net Zero, climate action, greenhouse gas emissions, Transform to Net Zero Strategy, municipal politics, climate targets, natural gas reduction, low carbon transportation, renewable energy, urban heat island, climate advisory group, community strategies, municipal elections, climate policy, sustainability.

SPEAKERS

Lyn Adamson, Streeter 2, Streeter 1, Miguel Mabalay, John Robinson, Julie Sawicki



Miguel Mabalay 00:07

Hello and welcome back to the On The Record News podcast. I'm Miguel Mabalay.



Julie Sawicki 00:12

And I'm Julia Sawicki. This semester, we're doing things a bit differently on our podcast.



Miguel Mabalay 00:17

We'll be focusing on municipal politics in the GTA, because the next election is coming up on October 26



Julie Sawicki 00:23

from who controls the city's budgets to how the mayor's power is different from that of Councilors. And if

M Miguel Mabalay 00:28

you have any other questions you want us to answer about local politics, send us an email to ontherecordnews@torontomu.ca, you can also find and subscribe to our podcast on Apple podcasts, iTunes, Spotify, or you can check it out directly on our very own website, ontherecordnews.ca,

J Julie Sawicki 00:46

Today, we're answering a big question. Toronto has some ambitious promises to reach net zero carbon emissions, but are we actually on track? City Council has pledged that Toronto will have reached net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2041 of the most aggressive climate targets in North America.

M Miguel Mabalay 01:04

But promises on paper are one thing, delivering on them is another.

J Julie Sawicki 01:08

To help answer some of these big questions and more, we're going to be looking at what the net zero strategy is, who handles decisions surrounding it, and if Toronto is hitting its mark. So far, we also had a chance to talk to some people at Tmu to see what they really know about Toronto's Climate Action Plan. Toronto's climate plan is called Transform to net zero strategy. City Council adopted the strategy in 2021 with the goal of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040, 10 years earlier than the previous target.

M Miguel Mabalay 01:40

The plan sets a series of milestones along the way, where the city aims to reduce 45% by 2025 65% by 2030 and ultimately reach net zero by 2040

J Julie Sawicki 01:52

to get there, Toronto is focusing on the three biggest sources of emissions in the city, buildings, transportation and waste.

M Miguel Mabalay 02:00

Yeah, in fact, homes and buildings account for more than half of Toronto's emissions, mostly from heating systems that rely on natural gas.

J Julie Sawicki 02:07

Transportation is the next biggest source, with mostly gasoline powered vehicles,

M Miguel Mabalay 02:11

and the third major contributor is waste, particularly methane emissions from landfills.

J Julie Sawicki 02:16

According to recent reports, Toronto's emissions were about 41% below 1990 levels in 2021 but reaching net zero will require much faster changes.

M Miguel Mabalay 02:27

The atmospheric Fund says the 2040 target will require massive investment policy changes and cooperation from other levels of government.

J Julie Sawicki 02:35

The government will also be looking at creating new rules and policies in five main areas. These are accelerating a reduction in the use of natural gas, setting performance targets for existing buildings, creating a carbon budget, increasing access to low carbon transportation options, and increasing renewable energy. One of the biggest questions when it comes to climate change is who has the power to act

M Miguel Mabalay 03:00

in Canada, climate policy is shared between municipal, provincial and federal governments. However, the majority of climate action is overseen at a federal level by Environment and Climate Change Canada, the ECCC, led by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, the Honorable Julie de Bruceen

J Julie Sawicki 03:18
on a so called smaller level, cities like Toronto don't have the power to control everything, but

M Miguel Mabalay 03:24
cities can and do control things that shape everyday life, and that includes major sources of emission.

J Julie Sawicki 03:33
Municipalities can manage waste collection, public transit, land use planning, local infrastructure changes and building standards.

M Miguel Mabalay 03:41
Cities can also introduce policies like green building standards, bike lanes, electric transit, compost programs and urban green spaces.

J Julie Sawicki 03:50
Toronto has already implemented several programs like these, such as the Toronto green standard, which sets environmental performance requirements for new buildings.

M Miguel Mabalay 03:59
The city is also expanding electric busses and promoting lower carbon transportation options like cycling and transit for an avid cyclist like myself, that sounds pretty good,

J Julie Sawicki 04:10
but experts say climate action at the city level still depends heavily on cooperation from the provincial and federal government.

M Miguel Mabalay 04:18

Major global cities like Toronto are also on the front lines of climate change,

J Julie Sawicki 04:22

this means dealing with extreme weather, heat waves, flooding and pressure on aging infrastructure, something we all personally experienced with Toronto's recent weather in February, a mix of heavy snowfalls and freezing rain.

M Miguel Mabalay 04:35

Urban areas can also experience something called the urban heat island effect, where concrete and asphalt trap heat, making cities significantly warmer than the surrounding areas. Many other areas are adopting permeable pavement, a more sustainable alternative to traditional asphalt.

J Julie Sawicki 04:51

Toronto is already seeing these issues. That's why climate planning isn't just about cutting emissions, it's also about adapting cities to a changing climate.

M Miguel Mabalay 05:00

Climate various solutions suggested are green roofs, tree planting initiatives, better storm water systems and climate resilient buildings.

J Julie Sawicki 05:08

And these solutions fall directly under the responsibility of city departments and the council committees that oversee them.

M Miguel Mabalay 05:15

One of the major places where climate policy gets debated at City Hall is the infrastructure and environment committee.

J Julie Sawicki 05:21
This committee focuses on issues like parks, environmental policy, waste management and infrastructure projects.

M Miguel Mabalay 05:27
When it comes down to it, its job is to review reports from city staff, debate proposals and recommend policies.

J Julie Sawicki 05:33
The committee is currently chaired by Toronto councilor Paula Fletcher. Meetings of the committee happen regularly at City Hall and are open to the public. The last one was held on February 25 future meetings and past recorded meetings can be accessed through the city of Toronto website. These committee discussions are often where new climate initiatives like emission reporting rules or transportation plans are debated before going to the full Council for approval.

M Miguel Mabalay 05:59
Toronto has also created a climate advisory group which facilitates communication and implementation of the transform to strategy.

J Julie Sawicki 06:07
The Climate Advisory Group has three main jobs, to give advice and help the implementation of community wide strategies, to advise collaboration between the city and external parties, as well as helping encourage and mobilize all sectors in the community to move towards a greener Toronto.

M Miguel Mabalay 06:25
Currently, the group has 25 members, a mix of sector representatives and individuals who act in a three year term to support the work surrounding Toronto's Net Zero strategy

J Julie Sawicki 06:34

to understand how realistic Toronto's climate targets are. We spoke with Lynn Adamson, a co chair on the City of Toronto's climate advisory group and climate fast, about the city's Net Zero strategy. How would you say that Toronto's goal of reaching net zero emissions compares to other global cities?

L Lyn Adamson 06:59

Oh, that's a really good question, and I do not keep up with all the other cities, but I can compare on one measure. One measure is the buildings emissions performance standards. So that is existing buildings. Buildings are the largest source of emissions in cities, in general, and certainly in Toronto, and the source of the emissions is fossil gas heating. So the cure for that is electrification. It's installing heat pumps or other forms of geothermal or other other forms of electricity support for buildings. So in Vancouver, there is a by law that prevents gas from being installed in any new buildings. But in Toronto, we are fighting to get that.

M Miguel Mabalay 07:52

Toronto has already begun implementing projects tied to the net zero strategy.

J Julie Sawicki 07:57

The city is pushing for new developments to meet increasingly strict emission standards provided by the Toronto green standard.

M Miguel Mabalay 08:04

Some city facilities are also being designed as net zero buildings, meaning they produce as much energy as they use. These include the city waterfront building with rooftop solar and a hydro thermal system that uses energy from the lake to provide 100% of the heating and cooling in the building. As a result, the building uses 71% less energy and produces 83% fewer greenhouse gas emissions.

J Julie Sawicki 08:30

At the same time, new parks and green infrastructure projects are being launched meant to reduce flooding, absorb carbon and cool urban areas.

M

Miguel Mabalay 08:38

We spoke with another expert and member of the City of Toronto climate advisory group. John Robinson, a professor who is a presidential advisor on the environment, climate change and sustainability at the University of Toronto, about how climate change could reshape life in the city. How much impact do you, like these kinds of projects really have on the city's overall emissions.

J

John Robinson 09:01

The city has a target, right? There's like the eight targets of transform to and so that's their agenda. That's what they want to have happen. And the staff managing it, their whole job is about reducing carbon emissions. It's not about doing anything else. It's about reducing carbon emissions. They take that agenda out to the community and they say, oh, climate emergency, you have to do all this stuff now. You can just see how that would play in a marginalized community where the city is not your best friend, right, and where maybe your neighbors are being reinvicted in the service of climate, it's just it's not going to work. So that's why we say don't lead with climate. Don't do that. Lead instead with sustainability. Never did climate come out as a goal from those discussions. It sustainability did. And so what that's what we're saying. Lead with a broader set of concerns. People are concerned with affordable housing. They don't think of that as a climate issue. It is a. Inability issue. They're concerned with transit access, right? They're concerned with food deserts and unavailability and unaffordability of fresh vegetables in their neighborhood, or whatever it might be. And they're in groups trying to, you know, tenants associations and so on, trying to make things better in all those ways. That's what we have to do. We have to find out what they're doing, what they care about, what they want, and then we have to make the connection to that. We're not saying to the city, this is a this is a way to, you know, coerce people or fool them into doing climate action that that would be terrible. Actually, we're saying no, this is a way to create a conversation that you you wouldn't have otherwise. That might indeed be the lay the groundwork for significant climate action.

J

Julie Sawicki 10:50

We also spoke with a few people on campus and around the city to hear directly from people in Toronto about Toronto's Net Zero promises and climate action.

M

Miguel Mabalay 10:58

We asked them two main questions, what do you know about Toronto's Net Zero promises?

S

Streeter 1 11:03

Ooh, not a lot. Yeah. Do you want to tell me more? Do you think the city is doing enough regarding climate change? The stuff that I think about when I hear that question is, I know they're doing a little bit more, like flood proofing stuff, which is pretty cool when you see like the new bike lanes coming in, they're doing like planter boxes and stuff like that. I suppose that's more like a mitigation of the results than the prevention thing, but that's been a nice thing to see. Do you think Toronto's doing enough for climate change?

S

Streeter 2 11:25

Toronto seems to be really focused on development at any cost. We've done a lot of incursions into the green areas of the city. I'm not optimistic about Toronto's prioritizing of climate issues.

J

Julie Sawicki 11:38

Hearing from people on the streets and around campus really shows how much or how little people in the city know about Toronto's Net Zero promises and how they really feel about the city's efforts on climate change.

M

Miguel Mabalay 11:50

And we also posted a question right outside of our very own OTR newsroom in the RCC, where we asked, What change would you be most willing to make to help Toronto reach its net zero targets. The options on our poster were driving less or using public transit. Pay more for greener buildings, change consumption habits such as fast fashion or delivery and a rogue option not provided by OTR, none of the above. We got a total of 55 answers, and here's what you said.

J

Julie Sawicki 12:19

47% of you say you would drive less or use more public transit. 7% say you would pay more for greener buildings. 41% say that they would be up for changing consumption habits, and 3% of you opted for none of the above, which we didn't even offer as an option.

M Miguel Mabalay 12:36

Interesting, yeah, so it's clear that many students are willing to make personal changes to their lifestyles, but are less inclined to support major Toronto projects, as we heard from our Streeters. It could be because many students just aren't informed about city politics and initiatives, and that matters, because some of the major decisions that shape climate action in Toronto, everything from transit investments to building rules, happens right at City Hall,

J Julie Sawicki 13:01

exactly as Toronto continues working towards its 2040, Net Zero target, climate policy becomes a bigger issue in local politics, and with the municipal elections coming up this fall, voters will have a chance to weigh in on just how aggressively Toronto should pursue those climate goals.

M Miguel Mabalay 13:19

Next week on the podcast, we'll break down what voters need to know heading into the fall election.

J Julie Sawicki 13:23

And that's it for this episode of On the Record.

M Miguel Mabalay 13:27

Thanks for listening, and we hope you learned something about Toronto's Net Zero strategy, and most importantly, before on track to reach it. Remember, if you have any questions for us about the upcoming municipal elections, send us an email to [on the record news@torontomu.ca](mailto:news@torontomu.ca). I'm Miguel.

J Julie Sawicki 13:42

and I'm Julia. Special, thanks to our producers, Sia Shete and Semi Won. Subscribe to the podcast on Apple podcasts, iTunes or Spotify. See you next time!