

COOL CALIFORNIA
EMPOWERING A CLIMATE CHANGE MOVEMENT ONE BLOCK AT A TIME

DAVID GERSHON

“The Cool Block is an exemplary how-to-guide for local communities to make a significant impact on climate change. The program demonstrates the untapped potential of citizens to engage in this grassroots initiative in an effective and achievable way. Very cool indeed!”

Gavin Newsom – Governor, California

A NEED AND OPPORTUNITY

With international climate change legislation struggling to get traction and the long timeframe required to scale up technological solutions and renewable energy, the world is searching for a low-cost, high impact strategy to address climate change while we still have the time to act. Since cities represent 70% of the planet’s carbon emissions and citizens’ daily lifestyle choices represent 70% of these emissions, empowering cities and their citizens to reduce their carbon footprint provides the world with an unparalleled opportunity to address climate change.

California is the natural candidate for seizing this opportunity.

- It has the most aggressive climate change legislation of any state in America, a country with the largest per capita carbon footprint.
- It is the fifth largest economy in the world and an international climate leader.
- Over a hundred California cities have developed climate action plans and are in need of a catalyst to activate them.
- It is renowned as an incubator for game changing social innovations and the world is looking to it for a climate change breakthrough.
- It is one of the places on the planet most suffering from the devastating effects of climate change with its droughts, fires and mudslides causing substantial loss of life and property. It needs to lead the way on climate action for its own survival.

Not surprisingly, California has seized this opportunity!

THE COOL BLOCK: AN ONRAMP TO THE FUTURE OF OUR CITIES AND PLANET

Called The Cool Block, three California cities – Los Angeles, San Francisco and Palo Alto – from January 2016 to June 2017 piloted this program on 45 blocks and experienced it successfully addressing two massive unmet societal needs. A scalable solution to address climate change and overcoming the social isolation people feel living in our urban-centric world. Doing the right thing for our children’s future on the planet in collaboration with their neighbors proved to be a winning formula.

Specifically, the pilot demonstrated that The Cool Block methodology enables substantive behavior change and participation on a block. The program achieved an average household carbon reduction of 32% with 25 actions taken, seven of which created more disaster resilient blocks. Fifty-five percent of the people on the block approached by their neighbor agreed to participate in the program. Stanford University research found that, “The program increased average scores for each of the program’s key performance indicators by an amount that was both substantively and statistically significant. Two of the most notable changes were nearly 40 percent increases in a block’s commitment to reducing its carbon footprint as well as sharing tools and resources.”

The program consists of five major topics (carbon reduction, disaster resiliency, water stewardship, neighborhood livability and empowering others) divided up over nine bi-weekly meetings led by different neighbors living on a block (corner to corner) or within a multi-family building. Participants select from a menu of 118 action recipes. Some actions are done as individuals and others are collective and carried out by the team of neighbors that forms on the block. Behavior change is achieved through a combination of action recipes, a peer support system, self-directed meeting scripts and the guidance of a trained volunteer coach who has been through the program.

The program is delivered through a web platform that helps households create an action plan, take action and track their progress in each topic and the overall program. Local government and nonprofit resources are integrated into each action to amplify its impact. A feedback system shows each household how their drops are filling the bucket so they are inspired to sustain their commitment. A city recognition program honors the accomplishment of each household and block.

“I really liked that there were step-by-step, clearly stated action recipes for the program,” reports San Francisco Cool Block participant Shannon Wells. “That helped a lot in figuring out what to do, what would make the most difference, set priorities, and do it.”

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL CONNECTION

At the core of this social innovation is the simple and profound power of neighbor-to-neighbor connection. The desire to connect with one’s neighbors in a meaningful way is a potent activator. And once neighbors come together and become a peer support system it creates the motivation to take action and sustain new behaviors over time.

Reflects Cool Block participant Wells, “I learned through The Cool Block program that my neighbors are more like me than I thought. We share a lot of the same goals for our community, and these goals cross cultural and ethnic lines.”

“What I saw was that people are hungry for community and that’s what the Cool Block offers. But it is so much more,” agrees Lorrie Castellano, Palo Alto Block Leader and Coach. “We helped each other go through lowering our carbon footprints as individuals and as a group. And once we learned we’d need each other in an emergency, we prepared our block by stocking food and sharing information about who has a generator, tools, and other things needed to survive.”

Summarizes Wells, “We helped rewrite the social blueprint of our neighborhood. We showed how to be a community which makes it easier for others to do the same.”

AN INNOVATIVE PUBLIC-PRIVATE-CIVIC PARTNERSHIP

The Cool Block is a non-profit initiative of Empowerment Institute. It facilitated a three-way partnership between its non-profit, the three cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco and Palo Alto, and LA-based natural cosmetics company, Josie Maran Cosmetics. The goal of this partnership was to leverage and create synergy between each entity’s core assets – empowerment expertise, community credibility and financial resources.

For Josie Maran Cosmetics it was an opportunity for CEO and business visionary, Josie Maran, to further what she calls corporate social engagement. She states, “I went into business to change the world and have my company be a force for good. To do that we needed to develop a more dynamic approach to social change beyond just minimizing our environmental and social impact and providing philanthropy to good causes. We call this the shift from corporate social responsibility, which is about minimizing harm, to corporate social engagement, which is about maximizing good.”

To that end, Josie Maran Cosmetics teamed up with Empowerment Institute to bring The Cool Block program to scale. She comments: “I believe The Cool Block program is revolutionary for people, cities and the planet and has huge potential in addressing climate change.” She adds, “I am very excited to have my company play a part in bringing this program to scale, first in California and then around the world.”

From a city’s point of view this public-private-civic partnership model provides them with two assets essential to meeting their climate action plan goals – behavior change expertise to address the substantial climate impact of their residents and the financial resources to implement a bottom-up solution. Even though more than 100 local climate action plans have been developed in California alone, they face stiff headwinds in community awareness and acceptance, much less financing. Moreover they focus on policy adoption and technology-based solutions but generally lack strategies that address the human factors that can either drive or hinder policy and technology adoption.

The Cool Block is a whole system climate solution that optimizes a city’s performance capacity. Creating bottom-up change from the demand-side (consumers and voters) activates top-down change from the supply-side (technology and policy adoption). This operating system upgrade for cities will be essential in navigating the climate-stressed world they have inherited.

James Keene, Palo Alto City Manager, describes why he is excited by his city’s participation in The Cool Block. He says, “The Cool Block links the climate change challenge facing our planet to the intimate, personal, social scale of the city block. It is rewiring our city and making it stronger. If I can play a little part in making this happen it will be enough for my career.”

COOL CALIFORNIA: ACHIEVING CLIMATE IMPACT AT SCALE

Cool Blocks will be brought to scale statewide through the Cool California initiative. Empowerment Institute will partner with selected cities and support them in a two-part challenge: the Cool City Challenge and the Cool California Challenge.

Cool City Challenge: Empowerment Institute will be inviting up to five early adopter California cities with demonstrated interest in Cool Blocks to partner in this endeavor. Each city needs to commit to achieving one of the three block participation goals over three-years. Over this timeframe Empowerment Institute will help each city achieve their goal. It will also build their capacity to continue growing the program on their own in subsequent years.

To create an even playing field, each block participation level will be organized into categories based on the municipality’s population size with large cities divided into smaller units. In subsequent years the Cool City Challenge will be opened up to all California cities with climate action plans and eventually cities around the world.

- Cool City: 25% block participation with an average carbon reduction per household of 25% and the required actions to become a disaster-resilient block.
- Super Cool City: The above on 50% of the blocks.
- Ultra Cool City: The above on 75% or more of the blocks.

Cool California Challenge: Empowerment Institute will invite any California city with a climate action plan to participate. The goals for this phase are for the city to achieve Cool City status or above and then compete for the Cool California Carbon Neutral City X Prize of \$10 million dollars. This prize money will be divided among the first municipalities in each population category to become carbon neutral. Empowerment Institute will work with city and state government officials to

develop carbon neutral city criteria and the city population size categories. Since time is of the essence this prize expires in 2030.

A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE

So what might it look like when Cool California is brought to scale? Here is an historical account from 2030 on how California, its cities and its citizens rose to the occasion and changed the world!

By 2020, 153 blocks across five California cities had achieved the Cool Block carbon reduction and disaster resiliency goals. As a result these cities and their citizens realized they now had the means to scale up their climate action plans and much more. Empowerment Institute's support over the next three years and the allure of the Carbon Neutral City X Prize were also attractive. But it was the effectiveness of the program combined with the social capital it generated that motivated them to get at least 25% of their blocks involved. They recognized this was something their communities needed and they wanted more of it.

Gung ho community members were eager to become an Ultra Cool City with 75% block participation. The more conservative minded wanted to take it a step at a time. And there were some community members still wondering if this could actually work at scale. Yes, it worked as a pilot, but could it really scale up? This level of citizen engagement had never happened before, yet the proof of concept showed it was scalable so maybe it could work. This was the back and forth thinking going on as these communities prepared themselves for this ambitious undertaking. While there was some trepidation, the momentum and excitement was clearly there. They were willing to give this their best effort knowing that in the worst case the city would have a lower carbon footprint, be more disaster resilient, and have a lot more social connectivity.

News of the Cool Block pilot success and the Cool California Challenge had begun spreading to many cities across the state and they asked how they could participate. Empowerment Institute realized that it did not have the luxury to wait three years for these five pilot cities to scale up Cool Blocks. It needed to provide any community with a climate action plan the tools to do a 25-block pilot. Those that succeeded with their pilot would then get the support needed to become a Cool City and eligible for the Cool California Carbon Neutral City X Prize. "Cool City" and "Carbon Neutral by 2030" became new buzz phrases in California cities and the race began for this coveted prize and recognition.

By 2025 twenty-two cities had become Cool Cities through achieving the 25% block participation, carbon reduction and disaster resiliency goals. Fifteen had become Super Cool Cities with 50% block participation. Twelve smaller communities had achieved this on 75% of their blocks becoming Ultra Cool Cities! These cities and their citizenry did more however than achieve the basic goals of the program. Their list of accomplishments was inspirational and profound.

They created robust low carbon economies built around the trifecta of solar energy combined with electric vehicles and energy efficiency retrofitted homes. Many used their smart phones and bikes as their vehicle redirecting the money they would have spent owning a car into comprehensive home retrofits to better take advantage of their solar energy.

The collective actions taken were also quite stunning. So much was possible with their new best buddies being the neighbors on their block. Many blocks used the land in their front or backyards and near the curbs to create community vegetable and herb gardens and plant community fruit trees. They created sustainable water irrigation systems and overall made their block more food and water resilient. They had weekly potlucks to enjoy the bounty and each other.

Many contiguous Cool Blocks formed into Cool Neighborhoods of approximately ten Cool Blocks to create community solar gardens providing renewable energy to the entire neighborhood. Because they were so well connected through their cool block teams and there was so much carbon literacy, it was rather easy to get people organized to do this. They also established Cool Neighborhood CERT teams to support first responders and vulnerable neighbors in the case of natural disasters. This along with the disaster resiliency of each block provided a lot of comfort to the neighborhood. Food, water, energy and disaster resiliency became the new norm in these Cool Neighborhoods.

It didn't stop there. The sense of agency people were experiencing began to spread beyond their immediate blocks and neighborhoods to the larger community. In forming Cool Block teams and learning how to make their block a better place to live, a new ethos emerged that translated very naturally into also making their community a better place to live. A renaissance of civic engagement and citizenship was unleashed that became unstoppable. Block after block looked around to see what was needed, put their Cool Block skillset into action and started transforming their community. Those in need of a helping hand got it. Those social and environmental issues that were endemic in the community now had a lot of people putting their shoulders to the wheel and solving problem after problem.

Community service was now the coin of the realm. It was not just because these communities were now more organized and had more skills. This was also a response to the divisiveness that had been making their communities less hospitable. It had finally reached a tipping point and they used Cool Blocks to seize the moment. It was breathtaking to observe this new community spirit take hold.

The city governments soon realized their role needed to evolve from purely service delivery to helping facilitate all this latent talent that was bubbling up from the community to do good. They trained staff to become community empowerment facilitators to coordinate public-private-civic partnerships between government agencies, local businesses, nonprofits and the Cool Block volunteers who wished to tackle specific challenges. The activation of the community's synergy potential was enabling the city and its citizens to achieve social, environmental and economic outcomes they never imagined possible. They were in the middle of a major reinvention process which they began calling Community 2.0.

But all this was just the warm up act. They would need every ounce of civic, public and private capacity and social cohesiveness for the lift ahead – becoming a carbon neutral city by 2030. This goal was not way in the future so no one had to think about it now. It was on their watch and the world needed them to act now! As each city went through the process of dramatically accelerating their climate action plan goals and timeline, it became very clear why Cool Blocks was a pre-requisite.

You need a community to raise a carbon neutral city. Not just any community, but a carbon literate, empowered and galvanized community where everyone has a stake in its future. A community with distributed leadership throughout the neighborhoods and the agency and empowerment tools to make transformative change happen on a large scale. A community with the kind of can-do attitude that comes from accomplishing something unprecedented and realizing it has the right stuff to take on an even bigger challenge.

With an inspiring and audacious goal, a precise due date, and community buy-in, people rolled up their sleeves and went to work. The talent in the community was primed and came out of the woodwork in droves. The youth were very involved as they had more time and felt the greatest threat to their future from climate change. They were far and away the most enthusiastic which was contagious to everyone else. They were integrated into all the community organizing aspects of the program including recruiting block leaders and supporting the teams in utilizing local resources, including themselves, to help amplify the program's impact.

Young social entrepreneurs, many who grew out of the first-hand knowledge they acquired doing the community organizing and developing local resources, designed green businesses to meet the burgeoning demand for the low carbon goods and services necessary to create a carbon neutral city. Existing businesses were also rapidly expanding to fill these new niches. Local business associations such as the Chamber of Commerce and new ones stepped forward to help raise capital for the infrastructure required of a carbon neutral city. The local nonprofits took on pieces of the carbon neutral city puzzle based on their areas of expertise and also greatly benefitted from providing services to support the booming low carbon economy.

The state with its very progressive climate policy and enlightened political leadership provided their muscle to help with the heavy lift these cities were taking on. Raising a carbon neutral city not only needed a community, it needed a state. The state political leadership realized for this upwelling of civic inventiveness to realize its full potential, it needed to bring its unique resources to the table. It did this by investing a portion of its annual cap-and-trade revenues to support these cities in growing the Cool Block program and building carbon neutral infrastructure. It mobilized and invested in its world-renowned state university brain trust to provide mentorship to each participating city in solving its unique technical requirements of becoming carbon neutral. It also provided generous tax incentives to cities that took on this challenge.

The cities in their new role as community empowerment facilitators coordinated this amazing diversity of talent and resources, but that was only the half of it. The need for serious climate action had reached a tipping point because of the many climate-related disasters occurring in or around their communities. The reality had finally sunk in that climate change was no longer a future, but a present danger to everyone's life and property. Nodding to its importance by creating long-term climate action plans was no longer acceptable. Kicking the can down the road hoping the next generation of city leadership would deal with the complicated political and financial challenges of creating a carbon neutral city was now morally repugnant to them *and* the electorate. If you were going to be a political leader, you needed to lead, and they did!

The quest to become a carbon neutral city ennobled the cities political leadership, who in turn empowered the city staff, who in turn helped facilitate community-wide civic engagement in this concerted and inspiring mission. While the goal was still daunting, with the political will now in play, the cities and their citizens were in the game. They needed to be because no city on the planet had cracked the code on how to integrate the complex technical, political, financial and community engagement puzzle pieces necessary to become a carbon neutral city. Technologically it was possible, this was known. It was the complexity and speed of change that was the challenge.

This was a second order change problem that would require second order change thinking and tools to rapidly transform multiple social systems to higher levels of performance and social value. The Cool Block program was designed as a second order change climate solution. This DNA was encoded in each block. What was needed was to decode how these blocks achieved their extraordinary results on a micro block-level and extrapolate it to the macro city-level.

These second order change codes included how to empower a group of people to achieve large goals in a short timeframe. Transform diverse content into a structured, easy to use, self-managed process. Build the capacity of a disparate group of people in the skills of mutual accountability, cooperation and collaboration. Develop teamwork so that everyone worked together effectively and efficiently. Design solutions that could be sustained through iteration over time. And more. It was all there. The community knew this stuff, not just intellectually but experientially. They put all their knowledge into play and watched transformation happen. It was a wondrous sight to behold.

This second order change knowledge was embedded at each level of scale. Each city participating in the Cool California Challenge was organized into peer support groups around five core topics: technology, finance, policy, community engagement and synergy. The synergy team scanned for cross-pollination opportunities to enable second order change breakthroughs. Each team used a structured meeting guide and had the support of a coach to help it achieve its goals. The overall initiative had a program director to help solve problems and keep everyone on track and motivated. This same structure was replicated at a regional and state level with each culling emerging best practices and circling them back down.

These knowledge exchanges were potent as each city stood on the shoulders of every other city. This synergized brainpower enabled multiple breakthroughs that were able to rapidly cascade from city to city. It was awesome to witness the release of such vast amounts of social creativity, collective intelligence and group genius. Creating the impossible could only become possible if people worked together in better and smarter ways. And they did!

The new “cool” in California was not just becoming carbon neutral; it was becoming a more intelligent and connected state. This was what Cool California came to mean. Everyone working together at their best to save the planet was 21st century cool. California was the social laboratory to show us how to do this. This was its destiny and it stepped up and met it!

By 2030 there were 23 carbon neutral cities in California. The X Prize had been distributed over the previous years to cities in each of the population cohorts with the largest competing city accomplishing the feat that year. The state’s political leadership, emboldened by its pioneering cities, upped its climate action ante. A carbon neutral state by 2045 was no longer good enough given the ticking clock of climate change; they would accelerate this timeline and become carbon neutral by 2040. But this was not a California thing anymore; knowledge of this daring social experiment had spread around the planet. Delegations from cities across America and around the world came to learn how these California cities had achieved this extraordinary goal. There was much to teach and each carbon neutral city took their responsibility seriously and became a teaching city. They were supported financially in doing this by the state, which took their climate leadership responsibility to the world very seriously.

The psychological barrier counterpart to the four-minute mile of a carbon neutral city had been broken many times over. The financing mechanisms were now in place and the funding was flowing generously with many cities winning the X Prize equivalent by virtue of the boon to their local economies. Carbon neutral cities and states had opened up the trillion-dollar market everyone knew was there when humanity fully stepped up to tackle climate change.

And California? Well it had done its job. It knew it still had a lot of work ahead as the fifth largest economy creating the first carbon neutral state in the world. Another day, another grand challenge. But at this moment it and the world could breathe a little easier by seeing a path forward for humankind on our beautiful home.

David Gershon, co-founder and CEO of Empowerment Institute, has been called the “number one expert on social change.” He applies his visionary leadership and social change expertise to designing second order change solutions for cities, countries and the planet that enable the seemingly impossible to become possible. He is author of 12 books including the award-winning *Social Change 2.0: A Blueprint for Reinventing Our World* and the best-selling *Empowerment: The Art of Creating Your Life As You Want It*. He has dedicated his life to empowering humanity to believe we can create the world of our dreams and designing the strategies and tools to help us make this a reality. dgershon@empowermentinstitute.net www.coolblock.org