Climate change action is local

Sacramento Bee 11-25-16
BY STEVE HANSEN AND KATE MEIS Special to The Bee

The election is over, and now we’re faced with serious questions about the potential effects of changes in legislative and budgetary support for environmental action in California and the world. Most Californians recognize environmental protections, economic growth and living-wage jobs go hand in hand. As a state we’re on target to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent by 2020, while growing our economy faster than the rest of the nation.

More than 4 in 5 Californians correctly believe climate change – including extreme-weather events such as extended droughts, massive wildfires and sea level rise – is a serious threat to the state’s economic future and our health. Communities across California are already experiencing water shortages, increased heat waves, massive loss of trees and coastal flooding, and many communities have also begun adapting.

Initial indications are that the Trump administration’s energy plans have great potential to undermine the ability to hold global warming to 2 degrees Celsius – a threshold beyond which scientists tell us there would be irreversible harm. Increasing oil and coal production, reversing the Clean Power Plan and stripping the Environmental Protection Agency of its power to work on climate change and air quality will severely damage the great progress our nation has made.

Yet most climate-change leadership and innovative responses have always been driven at the state and local level, including the bipartisan U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement in 2005, California’s landmark Assembly Bill 32 in 2006 and Gov. Jerry Brown signing a first-of-its-kind agreement in 2015 with leaders from 11 other states and provinces collectively representing more than $25.7 trillion in GDP and more than 1 billion people.

We draw inspiration and implementation lessons from local models:
• Public-private partnerships can reduce utility bills for businesses and homeowners across the state. The Property Assessed Clean Energy program is available to 90 percent of California households, and has already helped invest $2 billion in completed projects and create more than 16,000 jobs.

• Zero-net energy homes like those in the Spring Lake farmworker housing development in Woodland or KB’s zero-double-zero homes (which produce as much energy and water as they use) in Lancaster give individuals the power to make a real difference.

• Local climate-change initiatives are getting a boost from 68 recent college graduates in the yearlong CivicSpark AmeriCorps program, working on reducing water and energy use and increasing alternative energy and transportation.
• Urban greening projects in Sacramento and across the state are beautifying neighborhoods while cleaning our air and reducing urban heat.

• In Fresno, edible food is being diverted from the waste stream to feed people who need it while also reducing methane pollution and transportation-related emissions.

• Regional collaborations in greater Sacramento, the Sierra Nevada, the Bay Area, Los Angeles and San Diego share research and advance state policies that support climate action.

We have some difficult times and difficult conversations ahead, but Californians are resilient. The world badly needs California leadership on climate change, especially when the federal government is gridlocked or moving in a different direction.

Steve Hansen represents District 4 on the Sacramento City Council and can be contacted at shansen@city.ofsacramento.org. Kate Meis is executive director of the Local Government Commission, a Sacramento-based nonprofit, and can be contacted at kmeis@lgc.org.