

CHATHAM COUNTY 2025 CLIMATE RETREAT MINUTES AND ACTION REPORT

Central Pines Regional Council (CPRC) facilitated a two-day Climate Retreat for the Chatham County Board of Commissioners and the Climate Change Advisory Committee to deepen shared understanding of climate science and impacts in Chatham County, establish a common foundation for future climate action planning, and align on strategies for community-driven engagement. The retreat focused on building a collaborative framework for countywide climate resilience, learning from expert presenters, discussing sector-specific opportunities, and identifying next steps to support development of Chatham County's climate action approach. The following report summarizes the discussions, key themes, and areas for continued coordination between county leadership, staff, and partners.

Attendee List

Board of Commissioners

Karen Howard - Chair
Katie Kenlan – Vice Chair
David Delaney
Franklin Gomez Flores
Amanda Robertson

County Staff

Carolyn Miller
Daryl Butts
Brain Thompson
Kevin Lindley

Climate Advisory Committee

Robbie Cox – Chair
Vickie Atkinson – Vice Chair
Michael Petruska
Keith McLaurin
Sharon Garbutt
John Bonitz
Deb Gallagher
Alicia Koblansky
Charlie Cooper
Nita Dukes
John Graybeal
Pam Hawe

I. Retreat Day I

Welcome, Brief History, and Around-the-Room

The CPRC team welcomed participants and began the retreat by acknowledging the Climate Change Advisory Committee's decade-long efforts since its formation in 2015, emphasizing the importance of continuing this progress through strategic planning and coordinated climate action. The team shared an overview of the purpose of the retreat: to build shared understanding of climate science, establish a common framework for a county climate action process, and create clarity around roles, timelines, and expectations.

Emily Barrett introduced the facilitation method of implementing a "parking lot" system to capture ideas requiring later discussion. She also shared the following reflection question to guide discussion:

"What is one thing you are looking to learn about climate change, climate mitigation, etc.?"

Participants shared around-the-room name, title, & organization, noting their roles in Chatham's climate work

The Urgency of Climate Change and the Effects We Can Expect to See in Chatham County

Presenter: Dr. Jared Bowen, State Climate Office

Dr. Bowen presented data on increasing temperature extremes, humidity, and weather variability. He emphasized that recent summers may serve as early indicators of accelerating climate instability and noted the increasing intensity and inland reach of severe storms and hurricanes, underscoring the need for heat resilience and emergency preparedness.

Council members and the Advisory Committee discussed the importance of working to build resilient communities with these projections in mind to ensure public safety and infrastructure security. The issue of addressing public climate belief was raised with a focus on the role of community outreach, education, and a neutral framing of climate resilience.

Topics Raised:

- How might the county expand communication strategies to reach residents skeptical of climate science?
- What tools exist to frame resilience in ways that broaden support and participation?

What is a Climate Action Plan?

Presenter: Emily Barrett, CPRC

Emily provided a detailed walk-through of climate action planning best practices, emphasizing that Chatham County's community needs should determine the plan structure. She outlined common plan components, including baselining emissions, identifying mitigation and adaptation strategies, establishing performance metrics, and creating implementation steps. However, she encouraged a flexible approach—highlighting Town of Pittsboro's choice to track action-based metrics without an initial emissions baseline within their Climate Action Plan.

Council and Advisory Committee members asked clarifying questions regarding data collection, alignment with state guidance, and process timelines. Emily reiterated that the development process is iterative and should be paired with robust community engagement.

Topics Raised:

- Capacity and staffing needs to support CAP creation and long-term implementation.
- Integration with county's comprehensive plan and growth projections.

Climate Adaptation, Community Impact, and Education and Engagement

Presenter: Dr. Susan “Susie” Crate

Dr. Crate stressed the power of local stories and intergenerational learning to build climate understanding. She emphasized meeting residents where they already gather—parks, sports fields, farmers’ markets, and festivals—and highlighted successful “climate memory” exercises that best engage the public to think critically about climate change.

Dr. Crate prompted participants to identify common challenges in public engagement and identify opportunities for community in Chatham County.

Common Challenges in Climate Public Engagement:

- Lack of shared understanding of what can and cannot be done to address climate change
- Gaining the trust of the general population
- Lack of shared identity
- Need for an acceptance of diversity
- Lack of opportunities to address climate change publicly
- Public may feel as if it is hard for their voice to be heard; a need to “share the microphone”
- Lack of transparency and/or equitable communication

Opportunities for Community in Chatham County:

- Encouraging education and awareness of projected climate trends, with an emphasis on emergency management
- Building a sense of community with neighbors to encourage preparedness
- Seeding community discussions
- Creating a broad communications & outreach strategy to build community resilience
- Meeting people where they are with use of common language, engaging storytelling, and focus on lived experiences

Topics Raised:

- Ensuring equitable engagement across demographic groups.
- Use of personable community outreach, branding and engagement tools to encourage public participation.

Sector-by-Sector Approach to Framing Climate Change Action

Presenter: Alana Keegan, CPRC

Alana explained the purpose of organizing climate action by sectors such as agriculture, energy, buildings, transportation, land use, and emergency management & resilience. She noted that this approach supports easier planning, communication, and implementation.

Participants discussed agriculture’s prominence and agreed it would be an important early lens in Chatham’s climate plan development.

Sector: Agriculture

Presenter: Dr. Michelle Schroeder Moreno (CEFS)

Dr. Schroeder-Moreno discussed the importance of agricultural resilience and local food systems, noting Chatham's strong assets and the role of local farms in emergency supply scenarios. She encouraged participants to think holistically about soil health, biodiversity, and farmer networks, and emphasized Chatham's unique positioning to lead in this area.

Participants reflected on relevant agricultural topics, such as the use of traditional farming methods that sequester carbon, and brainstormed farming strategies that may provide support for Chatham County's rural and farming communities amidst climate disasters, etc.

Topics Raised:

- Local agriculture asset inventory and mapping
- Opportunities to integrate local farmers into emergency food systems

Closeout of Day 1 and Next Steps

Alana closed the session by encouraging participants to continue identifying assets and opportunities before the next retreat day and asked for individuals to write down or email her one thing they hoped would be covered in the second day. She confirmed that notes and flip-chart materials would be compiled and shared with attendees.

The meeting adjourned without formal votes or actions taken.

II. Retreat Day II

Welcome, Retreat Day I Summary, and Retreat Day II Goals

The session opened with remarks from facilitator Alana Keegan and Kevin Lindley, who welcomed returning and new participants, including several who were unable to attend the first retreat day. The group reviewed changes to the Day 2 agenda outlined in the addendum provided at the start of the meeting.

Alana reminded participants of the retreat's purpose and asked whether additional goals were needed for the day. She shared three overarching goals developed from pre-retreat feedback submitted by participants:

Retreat Goals:

- Build shared understanding of climate science
- Establish a common framework for the climate action process
- Clarify roles, timelines, and expectations

Chatham County Work Underway: Solid Waste, Heat Action, and More

Presenter: Kevin Lindley

Kevin Lindley shared updates on current Chatham County sustainability work, emphasizing solid waste management, waste collection emissions, and landfill operations. The county has a relatively low recycling contamination rate and continues to separate and collect glass for recycling through dedicated vendors. Composting and food waste diversion pilot programs are underway, with attention to waste reduction at county facilities. The presentation also highlighted ongoing monitoring of landfill gas and emissions, noting that fuel consumption for trash collection remains a leading source of emissions as Chatham County outsources their landfills. Kevin also clarified how greenhouse gas emissions are calculated in county inventories, noting distinctions between local operational emissions and emissions occurring at landfills where county waste is transported.

Topics Raised:

- State oversight and regulatory differences across landfills
- Strategies to increase public participation in recycling and waste reduction
- Measurement and scaling of composting programs
- Opportunities to track emissions from Chatham Transit for inclusion in future inventories

Climate Impacts on Energy Use and Energy Burden, and the Role of Local and State Policy

Presenter: Josh Brooks

Josh Brooks provided an overview of energy challenges and opportunities in North Carolina, focusing on how utility systems, renewable integration, and economic factors influence local government planning. The discussion emphasized how solar energy, microgrids, and renewable infrastructure can increase community resilience and reduce long-term energy burdens. Brooks noted the importance of collaboration between county staff, policymakers, and developers to plan for sustainable energy transitions and equitable access to clean energy opportunities.

Topics Raised:

- Land-use conflicts related to renewable energy planning, namely between housing development and agricultural land.
- Public misinformation surrounding solar projects
- Limitations of the electric grid and potential upgrades
- Alignment of building codes and future infrastructure needs

Funding Climate Action***Presenter: Nick Gower***

Nick Gower discussed strategies for financing climate action and resilience projects, highlighting the range of public and private mechanisms available to local governments. The session emphasized the need for fiscal planning that balances affordability, stability, and long-term investment. Participants explored the importance of engaging finance teams early in climate planning processes and identifying partnership models that reduce large debt burdens. The discussion underscored how climate action funding can be paired with cost savings to make implementation more achievable.

Topics Raised:

- Examples of financial tools used by other counties
- Leveraging mixed funding models for greater impact
- Upcoming state and federal funding opportunities

Coordinating Climate Action Plans and Community Engagement: Pittsboro, Orange County, and the Greater Region***Presenter: Shuchi Gupta***

Shuchi Gupta discussed regional coordination and the importance of community-based organizations (CBOs) in advancing climate goals. The presentation highlighted the role of the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) as a regional framework for engagement and emphasized the need for continuous communication and support from local governments with CBOs. Gupta discussed ways to strengthen relationships between local government staff and CBOs to ensure projects reflect community needs and priorities.

Topics Raised:

- How local governments can best align engagement strategies with regional planning efforts
- Opportunities for ongoing surveys and public input

Developing a Vision for Climate Action in Chatham County***Discussion facilitated by Alana Keegan***

Alana Keegan facilitated an activity that prompted participants to create a shared vision for Chatham County's climate future. The conversation touched on insights from previous sessions, focusing on values such as equity, community resilience, and relevant sectors.

Prompt:

“Imagine It’s 2045”

“Imagine it’s the year 2040. Our county is recognized as climate leaders. What specific results are we most proud of? Write out 3-4 specific outcomes. Focus on sensory and emotional language — not just facts or metrics.

Next, Alana asked participants to label their ideal outcomes as “essential for long-term goals” and/or “most likely to make near-term progress.”

The Following Key Themes were Identified:

(Near-term votes, long-term votes)

Land Use (8, 6):

- Increased tree cover, including urban areas
- Strategic land use planning
- Robust agricultural community & integrated local food culture
- Thriving natural ecosystems
- Significant amount of preserved natural and working lands (e.g. farms, grasslands, pastures, forests)
- New developments have large, preserved tracts of undisturbed land (e.g. 100 ft minimum buffers)
- Programs that support residents to reforest and put in native plants
- Edible forests on public lands, urban centers, and county property

Sustainable Development (7, 5):

- New construction is net zero
- Restoration efforts
- 50% multistory
- Well-planned, accessible housing & development
- Recruitment of eco-housing developers
- Energy-efficient residential & commercial buildings
- Energy burden for low-income residents eliminated
- Sustainable influence within utilities commission

Transportation (4, 6):

- 100% electric vehicle fleets
- Highly utilized public transit and transit-oriented development
- Dramatically reduced vehicle miles traveled by usage of EV bus options
- Towns have multi-modal forms of transportation
- Leader in transportation solutions (e.g. all automated electric vehicles have 80% carbon tax)

Equity & Inclusion (1, 6):

- Equity of resources
- Improved livability, affordability
- Marginalized and low-income communities receive the support and opportunities they need to survive and thrive
- Achieved the lowest need for affordable housing in NC
- Public health considered a high priority

Outreach & Education (4, 2):

- Creation of a community that strives for resilience and prides itself in climate leadership
- Effective communication and engagement strategies in place
- Empower the community through education
- Climate interests enabled by engaged, growing communications activity
- Highest level of climate literacy in NC
- People in Chatham County know about and are involved in climate solutions

Renewable Energy infrastructure (0, 4):

- Local solar batteries for all, community solar access
- Use of agri/aqua voltaic systems
- County converted to all electric
- County is a leader in solar farms
- Large scale local renewable energy generation
- County has multiple sources of clean energy generation sources
- More electric use than fossil fuels

Zero Emissions (0, 3):

- Key emitters have been identified
- Solutions developed to eliminate emissions

Waste Management (3, 0):

- Efficient waste management with 100% use of recycling and composting
- Waste to landfill per capita is half the current rate

Water Management (0, 1):

- Protection of wetlands and local waterways in planning
- Prioritization of stormwater management

Public-private partnerships (1, 1):

- Public-private innovation and collaboration
- Chatham is home to climate-based research and innovation through nonprofit and business

Building Resilient Communities:

- Communities are intra-dependent vs. Inter-dependent
- Communities can withstand natural disasters
- Resilient infrastructure for clean water, power, and connectivity throughout developed areas of the county while maintain rural tracts
- Officially recognized as a “transition community”

Food Production & Soil Health:

- Use of soil building and sequestration
- Prioritized local good production and community gardens
- Topsoil systems that emphasize priority of care for land and regeneration
- Chatham is a beacon of resilient agriculture and farmland productivity, leading to economic vitality.

Ecological Health:

- Ecological health and long-term sustainability are a priority over profit-driven models

Green Economics:

- Finance Office engaged in “Green Economics”

Where Do We Go from Here?

Discussion facilitated by Alana Keegan

The final session centered on synthesizing themes from the two-day retreat and identifying tangible next steps. Participants expressed shared interest in continuing collaboration, developing clear metrics for success, and ensuring consistent communication between the Climate Advisory Committee and the Board of Commissioners. Emphasis was placed on aligning climate initiatives with existing county priorities while remaining adaptable to new opportunities and funding resources.

Participant-Identified Next Steps

Each participant was asked to write down and share 1-2 tasks that they felt were the most important next steps for the county to take.

1. Organize and Assess

- Identify staff point-persons
- Assess current plans for CAP alignment, conduct a gap assessment (e.g. Plan Chatham)
- Identify current deficits and areas that can be built upon
- Study of other community CAPs to help develop high-level categories
- Sample RFP’s and related materials to be sent to group by Kevin Lindley

2. Build Framework and Structure

- Decide on the outlined metrics, goals, and structure of CAP
- Develop a framework that incorporates an equitable balance, addressing varied/diverse interests
- Develop clear timeline and list of priorities
- Identify issues with zoning, housing, & development

3. Strengthen Partnerships and Coordination

- Identify potential partnerships and topics for collaboration; see how to incentivize collaboration
- Communication and coordination with other counties and municipalities
- Establish continuous meetings between Committee & Board

4. Public Engagement and Communications

- Comprehensive public engagement that incorporates diverse voices and impactful storytelling
- Address misinformation through reframing attitudes around climate change
- Develop a communications strategy
- Strengthen community values surrounding climate change (e.g. awards, incentives)

5. Funding and Resource Allocation

- Amend budget to accommodate CAP (budget process & considerations)
- Begin search for varied funding opportunities

6. Implementation and Tracking

- Formulate dashboard for organization and/or public engagement
- Land conservation efforts
- Develop EV Fleets

Closeout and Next Steps

Alana Keegan closed the retreat by summarizing key takeaways and reiterating the importance of maintaining cross-departmental collaboration. Next steps include refining the county's climate vision, coordinating follow-up meetings, and developing an actionable framework to guide Chatham County's next phase of climate planning.

Action Items:

November 20 – Climate Advisory Committee will convene to review outputs of retreat, assess and inventory existing work by the county related to climate, and identify recommended sectors for climate plan focus based on other county plans and priorities. This will also be used to outline a proposed scope of focus for the county's RFP for a Climate Action Plan.

December 15 – Central Pines will present to County Commissioners on the retreat, discussion, and next steps.

January (Date TBD) – The Committee will present an updated inventory and recommended RFP scope to the Board.