



## Ahead of the curve

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Long before it was cool to be green, King County, Wash., Executive Ron Sims was interested in environmental issues. In fact, in 1988, as a county councilmember, Sims sponsored legislation to fund an Office of Global Warming. The idea was before its time and the measure did not pass, but Sims did not stop working to mitigate global warming and develop programs to help people adapt to the changing climate. "We're going to have global warming, and people are going to have to live with it," Sims says.

So, he makes it his job to determine how people can live with it more easily. Last year, Sims commissioned scientists at the University of Washington's Climate Impacts Group to project the condition of King County in 2050, the results of which were "very unsettling," he says. Predictions included warmer, wetter winters with flooding caused by melting snow runoff from the mountains. Immediately, Sims had the local levy system tested and realized it would not withstand the projected levels of rain and flooding.

To prepare the area for the future, Sims proposed abolishing all current flood districts and creating one King County Flood District to rebuild all levies "to a 2050 standard," he says. The combined district would be financed by increased sales taxes, and when it came to a vote, the measure passed with flying colors. "I was shocked," Sims says of the bill's passage.

But, for those who work with Sims, the outcome is just one testament to his unique leadership style. "So much of leadership is creating a better future," says Jim Lopez, Sims' deputy chief of staff. "Ron's leadership style takes us into the future. He takes us there, makes us imagine what it will be, and then designs plans to get us there. Such vision combined with action is a very important combination."

For his leadership in finding solutions to environmental, health and transportation problems to create a better home for residents, King County Executive Ron Sims is American City & County's 2008 County Leader of the Year.

## Building a greener future

In addition to reconstructing the county's levy system to adapt to a changing climate, Sims also works to lessen potential environmental damage. With representatives of 12 other counties, Sims helped launch the Cool Counties Climate Stabilization Initiative last year. The program seeks to

marshal the resources of counties across the nation to address the challenges climate change poses. Each participating county pledges to reduce its contributions to climate change through internal operational improvements, demonstrate regional leadership to achieve climate stabilization, help its community become climate resilient and urge the federal government to support the group's efforts. Under Sims' leadership, King County has committed to reduce its emissions rate by 80 percent by 2050.

Based on the county's experience in developing and implementing its own climate action plan, in 2007, Sims co-authored a guidebook for local, regional and state governments on how to prepare for climate change. The book, "Preparing for Climate Change: A Guidebook for Local, Regional and State Governments," is available for free at the county Web site ([www.kingcounty.gov/exec/globalwarming](http://www.kingcounty.gov/exec/globalwarming)) and now is being used by hundreds of governments around the world. "People accept the fact that we will have global warming, and for the most part, they are accepting our vision of how to deal with it," Sims says.

## **Improving community health**

Closely related to Sims' environmental interests are his concerns about residents' health. An estimated 16,000 children in King County have no health insurance, according to a 2004 survey. For Sims, that figure is unacceptable: He wants all children in King County to have access to health and dental insurance coverage and preventive services.

In 2006, Sims convened the Children's Health Access Task Force (CHATF) of experts to advise King County on creating a county-based children's health program. When the CHATF recommended the creation of King County's Children's Health Initiative (CHI), a local approach to improving health for low-income children, Sims started finding money for the cause.

By mid-2007, Sims had led the community in raising \$6 million in public/private funding to provide health and dental insurance coverage for all county children. Under his leadership, Seattle-based Group Health Cooperative committed its largest community grant ever, \$1 million per year for three years, to further the CHI goals. That spurred Seattle-based Washington Dental Service to contribute another \$1 million, and then 18 more organizations contributed a total of \$1 million, matching a \$3 million commitment from the King County Council. "It was all because Ron was out there talking to people, explaining the importance of this program," says Rachel Quinn, health policy liaison for King County.

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