

Laura Dent – Sierra Club Questionnaire

August 26, 2024

I am a champion for climate action on Harrisonburg City Council, and I intend to continue to lead on these issues in my second term. I've brought climate front and center in our discussions and priorities, and I have plenty more to do to implement our environmental goals.

I'm the City Council representative on the Environmental Protection Standards Advisory Committee (EPSAC). In this role, I've worked with city staff and stakeholders on energy and environmental issues, and taken a lead role in crafting policies to benefit our community.

I serve on both the national and state energy committees advocating for cities: I'm one of two Vice Chairs of the National League of Cities federal advocacy committee for Energy, Environment, and National Resources, and a member of the Virginia Municipal League committee on Infrastructure and Environment. In these leadership positions I bring our needs and aspirations to a higher level on behalf of our community.

My commitment to climate priorities speaks for itself in my record on City Council, and I plan to continue to move these issues forward into real progress.

1. According to Harrisonburg's 2022 Community inventory report, the three biggest sources of community greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the city are: commercial (30.8%), transportation (27.5%), and residential (12.7%). How will you approach lowering GHG emissions in each of those sectors?

In my work with EPSAC, we've added Community Goals to the Environmental Action Plan (EAP) to enlist the participation of the entire city to meet our GHG reduction goals, not just the municipal sector (as the EAP was originally interpreted to mean). City-owned buildings and transportation account for only 3% of our GHG emissions, so we need to include the other 97%! EPSAC recommended these goals to City Council, who passed the proposal to make the community goals part of the EAP.

In the commercial sector, I'm promoting Commercial-Property Assessed Clean Energy (C-PACE), a financing mechanism that enables businesses to implement solar and energy efficiency in a way that stays with the property. When the Economic Development department of the City launched C-PACE (a big win – renewable energy now makes business sense!) I insisted on having a kickoff meeting that involved all participants: local financial services, businesses, builders, solar developers, and solar advocates. The next steps will be actually implementing these programs. I've been enlisting the support of the business community, and will continue to find the most effective ways to do so.

In transportation, I've worked closely with the Harrisonburg Department of Public Transportation, which also runs our school buses. We've acquired two electric school buses and have applications in process for three more. When the pilot program for microtransit (commonly known as "public Uber") gets under way, I'm proposing electric

vehicles for these smaller transit buses. The city has plans to transition to electric vehicles for our fleet, and we're investigating options for public EV charging with federal funding. For active transportation, our city seeks funding for major projects such as the RAISE grant we received to create our dedicated bike lane on Liberty Street, and SMART SCALE funding for bicycle and pedestrian safety. We require sidewalks with any new real estate development, and negotiate for shared use paths where appropriate. As chair of the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Metropolitan Planning Organization (HRMPO), I facilitate the discussions of transportation projects in Harrisonburg and the "urbanized area" of Rockingham County.

For residential, I've promoted our participation in the SolSmart program, rewarding our city's commitment to renewable energy. The City has achieved SolSmart Silver status by explicitly permitting rooftop solar in all zones. We'll continue to work toward Gold status, for which one of the main requirements is to amend our zoning ordinance to incorporate solar. As a member of the Zoning Ordinance Advisory Committee, I'll make sure we address allowing solar in order to achieve that status to work towards our climate goals. On Planning Commission, I've made it clear to developers that any new proposal for housing should include energy efficiency, EV chargers, and solar to receive my support!

Also, even though the municipal sector produces only 3% of our GHG emissions, I'd like to address how I've worked with city government to advance our environmental goals, since I believe the city should lead by example. Among other climate initiatives, I co-authored the Solar Resolution (short title) which enacted our energy efficiency and renewable energy requirements for City-owned buildings, making a more rapid and more stringent implementation than the Virginia law required. I support Direct Pay as a funding mechanism for more solar installations on city properties. And, on EPSAC, I endorsed the Municipal Net Metering policy that directs city buildings to provide solar energy as a donation to the community.

I'm looking forward to seeing the solar panels on the Turner Pavilion! In EPSAC, we unanimously chose that as our top priority for our Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG) funding. Overall, we should take advantage of the tsunami of federal funding now available for climate and sustainability initiatives.

2. One of the community goals of Harrisonburg's Environmental Action Plan is to "ensure that the transition to a low-carbon future is effective, affordable, equitable and inclusive." How will you work to ensure that the environmental benefits are equitable?

I support the CHP weatherization program, since energy efficiency helps lower households' energy bills. Households with greater than 10% of their expenses on utilities are considered energy-burdened, and our priorities include reducing this burden for impacted residents, especially given the prevalence of our Asset Limited, Income Constrained (ALICE) population.

The City has applied for a \$1 million grant, the Environmental and Climate Justice Community Change Grant Program (CCG) from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to support community engagement with disadvantaged populations in the City and

collaborate to update the EAP with emphasis on environmental justice. It's crucial to have those voices at the table.

This CCG is one example of federal funding available through the Justice40 initiative, a goal that 40 percent of benefits of investments in climate, clean energy, and affordable housing address the needs of disadvantaged communities. Harrisonburg will seek funding and raise the priority of local investments in these programs.

3. 37% of community GHG emissions in Harrisonburg are from electricity. If Dominion Energy doesn't meet its VCEA renewable energy commitments sufficient for the City to attain its emissions goals, what actions will you take specific to our municipal utility, Harrisonburg Electric Commission, to reduce those emissions?

I would like to make it clear that HEC, as a city entity, is accountable to our City's climate goals as specified in the EAP, specifically to be carbon-neutral by 2050 – and we shouldn't depend on Dominion to reach that goal. My intention is for City Council to amend our city code as needed, and I'm pursuing the internal negotiations to bring about these changes. One proposal is to add "environmentally sustainable" to HEC's mandate; we'll evaluate to find the most effective approach.

4. The city has started the process of revising its zoning ordinances. Sustainability and urban planning experts have noted that mixed-use and higher density development are ways that zoning rules can help address climate change. What opportunities do you believe this process presents? What needs to happen to ensure that revising our zoning ordinances will produce equitable outcomes and promote the City's GHG emission reduction goals?

The current zoning update presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to revise our zoning to reflect our new emphasis on climate action. As a member of the Ordinance Advisory Committee (OAC), I'm promoting options for a more livable and sustainable city, such as greater density, mixed-use zoning, and eliminating parking minimums. A key component of this effort is public education and engagement, to alleviate concerns that some neighbors may have about issues of increased density and affordability.

5. What other environmental issues do you see in the city, and how would you address them?

By far the largest environmental issue that is looming for cities nationwide is PFAS – the regulation and mitigation of the so-called "forever chemicals" that are widespread in our water system and in a multitude of products from cookware to firefighting chemicals. Our public utilities director follows these developments closely. We here in Harrisonburg are fortunate to have a pristine water source from the mountains, and testing has revealed zero PFAS in this source. Even as we expand to the new water source from the Shenandoah River, we are monitoring any potential concerns and will address them as needed.

Water issues in our region also include droughts and flooding due to the increased volatility resulting from climate change. I recently attended the Chesapeake Bay Local Government Advisory Committee (LGAC) meeting to discuss water issues of the entire watershed. Our local water management practices have far-reaching consequences downstream. I support the city in water conservation as needed, and protecting our water resources through management and funding.

Waste management will probably be the next focus area in EPSAC (I insisted on doing Buildings and Energy after we completed Transportation). We'll revisit questions on recycling, plastics, and other waste products.

Other local issues include food supply. The new Eateries Acting Towards Sustainability (EATS) program from Public Works creates incentives for local restaurants to advance their environmental practices.

In summary, I have been and will continue to be a leader in climate action. I appreciate the concerns and the advocacy of our local environmental groups.