



Climate Leader Communities Certification & Grant Program



PROGRAM GUIDANCE

Introduction

The Green Communities Act of 2008 established the Green Communities Designation and Grant Program, creating the framework for achieving designation status and awarding grant funds to municipalities for energy efficiency projects. Since then, the vast majority of Massachusetts municipalities have voluntarily become designated Green Communities, partnering with DOER on hundreds of projects resulting in energy and cost savings.

However, the goals articulated in the [2021 Climate Law](#) and the [Massachusetts Clean Energy and Climate Plan for 2025 and 2030 \(CECP\)](#) pivot the focus from energy reduction to greenhouse gas reduction. As a result, DOER's programs supporting municipalities are also pivoting. The Climate Leader Communities certification program, evolving from the Green Communities program, creates a new voluntary framework for meeting these goals by providing tools and resources to help municipalities reduce emissions by electrifying non-electric energy uses and maximizing the efficiency of buildings and transportation. The following guidance describes the Green Communities Division's Climate Leader Communities Certification and Grant Program process (pursuant to M.G.L.c. 25A §10 (b)).

Becoming certified as a Climate Leader Community provides access to grant funding to a municipality to support all or a portion of the cost of:

- studying, designing, constructing and implementing energy efficiency activities including, but not limited to, energy efficiency measures and projects;
- procuring energy management services;
- adopting energy efficiency policies; and,
- siting activities related to and construction of renewable energy generating facilities on municipally owned property.

The Climate Leader Community Certification process requires a sequence of steps:

- 1) To understand all the requirements of becoming a Climate Leader Community, it is important to review the detailed guidance for each requirement, which can be found at the Climate Leader Community Certification and Grant Program page of DOER's website.
- 2) A municipality applies to DOER's Green Communities Division (the, "Division") for certification that they have demonstrated compliance with the requirements established by the Division to become a Climate Leader Community. These requirements, along with documentation submission guidelines, are outlined in this document. **Please note: if all the required documents listed are not included as part of the submission, the Division reserves the right to reject the application in its entirety.**
- 3) The Division reviews the application and determines whether a municipality meets the requirements. The Division then informs the municipality of its decision. If certified as a Climate Leader Community, the municipality will be informed and will be eligible for enhanced grant funding opportunities through the Green Communities Division.
- 4) Climate Leader Communities will be required to recertify every three (3) years by updating their roadmaps AND demonstrating that they have implemented at least one activity from the Climate Leader Communities Best Practices List. When recertifying for the first time, Climate Leaders will need to select a best practice from the Community Engagement category.

Instructions

Certification Application (Required)

To receive official certification, the applicant must complete the Climate Leader Certification Application and submit it to the Division for review. Once the Division has completed its review, it will notify the applicant whether it has been certified as a Climate Leader Community.

Deadline for Certification Application

Certification application deadlines will be established each year by the Green Communities Division.

To apply:

Application is an entirely online process; no hard copies of any documents are to be submitted. Instructions for applying online will be provided. Contact your Green Communities Regional Coordinator for access to the Climate Leader Communities Online Certification Application system.

Grant Application (Required for funding)

Once certified, each Climate Leader is eligible to submit a proposal for the use of its enhanced grant funding via the Green Communities competitive grants and other opportunities. Certified Climate Leader Communities must fill out a grant application (provided by DOER) and submit it for consideration.

Grant awards resulting from this process will be governed by 815 CMR 2.0

Requirements for Becoming Certified as a Climate Leader Community

A municipality must do ALL the following:

REQUIREMENT #1: Must be a Green Community in “Good Standing”

A municipality seeking Climate Leader Community certification must be an existing Green Community in good standing as documented by the most recent fiscal year’s Green Communities Annual Report. The Annual Report shall demonstrate the municipality continues to meet the five Green Communities Designation Criteria as established by M.G.L Ch. 25A Sec. 10 (c). Municipalities shall be considered to be in “good standing” if they:

- Maintain the zoning provisions that established the as-of-right siting of a) renewable or alternative energy generating facilities; or b) renewable or alternative energy research and development (R&D) facilities; or c) renewable or alternative energy manufacturing facilities in their Green Communities Designation application for meeting Criterion 1.
- Maintain the expedited application and permitting process under which Criterion 1 facilities may be sited within the municipality, in accordance with the Green Communities Designation application for meeting Criterion 2. Municipalities with active moratoriums on the permitting of ground-mounted solar PV systems and/or battery energy storage systems are NOT considered to be in “good standing” for the purpose of Climate Leader certification.
- Provide updated data related to the municipality’s energy usage and progress toward its twenty percent (20%) energy reduction goal, in accordance with its Energy Reduction Plan submitted to meet Green Communities Designation Criterion 3.
- Maintain adherence to the municipality’s Fuel-Efficient Vehicle Policy, in accordance with Green Communities Designation Criterion 4.
- Comply with the requirements of the Stretch Energy Code (225 CMR 22 and 23), in accordance with Green Communities Criterion 5.

Documentation Required

Submission and approval of the most recent Green Communities Annual Report

REQUIREMENT #2: Establish/maintain a local committee to advise, coordinate, and/or lead clean energy and climate activities

Municipalities must either establish or maintain a local committee that advises and helps to coordinate clean energy and climate activities in the municipality.

Municipalities that do not have such a committee can establish the local committee by City Council or Select Board vote, as appropriate. Members of the local committee may be appointed from municipal staff and departments, elected officials, volunteer members of community boards and commissions, as well as interested residents. It is also important to include representation from local and regional public schools.

Communities may also work with existing community organizations to help implement clean energy/climate programs. Municipal governments will need to adopt a resolution recognizing the collaboration between the local government and the nonprofit organization. The resolution should authorize the partner to pursue Climate Leader certification in partnership with the community.

Documentation Required

To satisfy the local Climate Team requirement with an existing committee, applicants must submit the following:

- Name of committee, list and affiliation of current members
- The mission or charge of the committee
- Agendas and minutes from the previous six months
- A summary of activities undertaken in the past twelve months

To satisfy the local Climate Team requirement with a recently formed committee, applicants must submit the following:

- Minutes from City Council or Select Board meeting establishing Climate Team
- Name of committee, list and affiliation of current members
- The mission or charge of the committee
- Planned meeting schedule and goals for first year

To satisfy the local Climate Team requirement by partnering with a local non-profit community organization, applicants must submit the following:

- Resolution by City Council or Select Board recognizing the collaboration between the municipality and the nonprofit organization
- Memorandum of Understanding between the municipality and community organization identifying partnership goals and proposed tasks undertaken by the

- organization for the following twelve months
- Designation of at least one municipal staff member as a point of contact

Guidance Materials

[Team Guidance Document](#)

REQUIREMENT #3: Municipal Decarbonization Commitment

Municipalities seeking Climate Leader Community certification must commit to eliminating on-site fossil fuel use¹ by the municipality by 2050.

Documentation Required for Municipal Decarbonization Commitment

To meet this requirement, Climate Leader applicants shall submit one of the following:

- Certified minutes from the meeting in which the clean energy/climate resolution took place, along with the resolution itself.
- A copy of the executive summary and a weblink from a completed climate action plan, or if the process is still underway, a brief description of what has been accomplished and a weblink to the municipality's climate action website.
- An affirmation from the municipal Chief Executive Officer that the city or town remains committed to the goals articulated in the [Metro Mayors Coalition Climate Mitigation Commitment](#).

REQUIREMENT #4: Municipal Decarbonization Roadmap

Municipalities seeking Climate Leader Community certification must develop a roadmap for decarbonizing municipal operations (which includes town and school buildings, drinking water and wastewater treatment plants, pumping stations, open spaces, and vehicles).

Consistent with the goals established by [Executive Order 594](#) governing emission reductions for state government, municipal decarbonization roadmaps should focus on eliminating the use of onsite fossil fuels in buildings and vehicles, using a "Zero Over Time" approach that addresses "trigger events" such as but not limited to, equipment replacement, roof

¹On-site fossil fuel use includes municipal buildings, municipal vehicles, as well as school district buildings and vehicles included in the municipal portfolio.

replacement, change of use, substantial renovation, etc., in conjunction with evaluating electrification of heat, solar and storage opportunities. Municipalities shall ensure that greenhouse gas (GHG) reductions, energy efficiency, renewable and clean energy, and emissions reduction strategies are incorporated into their equipment replacement and capital and master planning efforts in support of the community's goals.

Municipalities with local public schools must include school facilities and vehicles in their roadmaps; those that are part of a regional school district may include those facilities.

Documentation Required

The municipality must provide a copy of its roadmap for eliminating the use of onsite fossil fuels for municipal operations by 2050. At a minimum, the roadmap must include the following information:

- Identification of the greenhouse gas emission (GHG) inventory tool used
- The emissions generated by buildings, vehicles, and water/sewer operations
- *Specific emission reduction measures* to be implemented as indicated by "triggering events" to reduce the use of onsite fossil fuels in buildings and vehicles by at least 25 percent by 2030, and a timeline with milestones to implement additional measures to transition away from the use of onsite fossil fuels by 2050.
- Documentation that both the municipal government and local school district have adopted the roadmap. If a regional school district is included as part of the certification, documentation that the regional school district has adopted the roadmap must be included.

Guidance Materials

[Municipal Decarbonization Guidance Documents](#)

REQUIREMENT #5: Zero-Emission-Vehicle First Policy

All Departments in the municipality must purchase only zero-emission vehicles for municipal use whenever such vehicles are commercially available and practicable.

Documentation Required

The following documentation must be provided as evidence that the municipality has met this criterion:

- Copy of the policy or other mechanism adopted for purchasing only zero-emission vehicles
- A replacement plan for non-exempt vehicles with zero-emission vehicles
- Documentation that both the municipality and the local school district have adopted the zero-emission vehicle policy. If a regional school district is included as part of the certification process documentation that the regional school district has adopted the zero-emission vehicle policy must be included.

Guidance Materials

[ZEV First Policy Guideline documents](#)

REQUIREMENT #6: Specialized Stretch Energy Code Adoption

Communities seeking Climate Leader certification must adopt the Specialized Energy Code. The Specialized Code is required ([M.G.L Ch. 25A Section 6](#)) to be designed to achieve Massachusetts GHG emission limits and sub-limits set every five years from 2025 to 2050. As a result, all compliance pathways under the Specialized Code are designed to ensure new construction that is consistent with 2050 net-zero goals, primarily through deep energy efficiency, reduced heating loads, and efficient electrification.

The recommended way for cities and towns to meet this requirement is by adopting the Specialized Code (the entirety of 225 CMR 22 and 23 including Appendices RC and CC) and are directed to do so in the manner prescribed by law. The code may also be rescinded by any municipality in the manner prescribed by law.

Towns are advised to adopt the Specialized Code as a general bylaw at Town Meeting. Cities are advised to adopt the Specialized Code by general ordinance voted by City Council.

Documentation Required

The municipality must provide documentation of the city council or town meeting vote adopting the entirety of 225 CMR 22 and 23 including Appendices RC and CC. ***The vote must include the effective date of the Specialized Energy Code.***

Guidance Materials

[Specialized Code Guidance Documents](#)

RECERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Implementation Of Best Practices

Municipalities that become Climate Leader Communities are expected to not only address the GHG emissions resulting from municipal operations but also engage in clean energy/climate activities in their communities and continue to implement best practices that promote climate mitigation and clean energy adoption.

Grant funds from Climate Leader Communities grants are available to support these initiatives, as well as other funding sources from EEA and its agencies. Municipalities seeking to maintain their Climate Leader Communities certification status will be required to apply for recertification every three years by updating their roadmaps and implementing one Climate Leader Best Practice. For the first recertification cycle, the best practice shall be selected from the Community Engagement Category. The Best Practices Toolkit is available on the Climate Leader Communities website.