



Watertown City Council Committee on Climate and Energy

Councilor Palomba, Chair, Councilor Bays, Vice Chair, Councilor Offei, Secretary
Committee Report from Committee Meeting held on March 23, 2026

The Committee convened on Monday March 23, 2026, at 5:45 pm in the Richard E. Mastrangelo Council Chamber. The meeting was also on zoom. Present were Councilor Anthony Palomba, Chair; Councilor Caroline Bays, Vice Chair; and Councilor Theo Offei, Secretary. Also present in chambers were Councilor Vincent Piccirilli, Councilor Lisa Feltner, and Councilor Nicole Gardner. Staff present were Mia Kenna, Sustainability Planner; Silas Fyler, Assistant Director for Energy Management; Katie Swan, Environmental Planner and Conservation Agent; and Em Schule, Energy Advocate. Residents attending the meeting in-person included Deborah Peterson, Nancy Hammett, Ernesta Krackiewicz, Susan Falkoff, Jolly Tager, and David Aitcheson. Resident Brian Hebeisen attended on Zoom.

Purpose of the Meeting

The purpose of the meeting was to review and discuss the Climate and Energy Plan 3-Year Metric Report. The Report is attached.

Opening Remarks

Councilor Offei

Councilor Offei thanked the public for their attendance and characterized the meeting as meaningful climate accountability work — not merely goal-setting, but pausing to measure progress honestly and course-correcting where needed. He thanked city staff for producing the three-year metrics report, acknowledging the difficulty of pulling from dozens of data sources, navigating gaps, and being transparent about what is not yet known. He also recognized WFCC for the quality and technical rigor of their written response, noting that their letter raised concrete methodological questions and proposed alternative approaches. He stated his goals for the meeting: clarity on data questions raised, a shared understanding of where the plan needs acceleration, and a path forward on metrics not yet being tracked. He requested his opening remarks be included in the official minutes.

Councilor Palomba (Chair)

Councilor Palomba thanked the sustainability team, WFCC, and all attendees. He noted that the 2022 Climate and Energy Plan is subject to a five-year comprehensive review in 2027, making this metrics review a valuable preparatory step. He stated his intention to conclude the meeting no later than 8:00 PM and, if necessary, to schedule a follow-up meeting. He provided an orientation to the plan structure — five elements, each with goals, strategies, and actions, totaling 67 proposed actions — and noted that a column correlating plan actions to specific metrics had been added to the report at his request following the December committee meeting.

Staff Presentation: Three-Year Metrics Review

Mia Kenna, Sustainability Planner, led the presentation on behalf of the sustainability team, joined by Silas Fyler, Katie Swan, and Em Schule.

Plan Actions Status Overview

Of the 67 total actions in the Climate and Energy Plan, staff reported the following status breakdown:

- 22% Initiated — preliminary or ground-level work has begun
- 39% In Progress — initial research complete; city staff and partners actively working
- 12% Established and Ongoing — program built and functioning
- 6% Completed — specific end goal achieved (e.g., organics recycling program)
- 21% Not Yet Scheduled — no work or research begun

Context and Purpose of the Metrics Review

Ms. Kenna explained that the metrics were written by consultant KLA in the original 2022 plan and were not designed to correlate directly with specific plan actions — they were proposed as quantitative approximations of progress in each plan section. The metrics review asked three driving questions: Are the proposed metrics still appropriate? Are the data sources still viable? Where are data gaps that need to be addressed before the five-year review?

Staff identified five categories of metric status used throughout the report:

- Data remains consistent with the original source
- Updated to a more precise data source
- No metric was ever created for this action step
- Original source no longer available or not updated; alternative source needed
- No source or proxy available at this time; data cannot be reported

Ms. Kenna noted that overall Watertown is trending toward most goals that could be tracked, while acknowledging real gaps in several areas.

Discussion by Plan Element

1. Buildings and Energy

Staff reported the following status across the eight Buildings and Energy metrics:

- Trending toward goals (4): potential solar capacity on rooftops; installed solar capacity; number of gas/oil-heated residential properties; number of gas/oil-heated commercial properties
- Trending away from goals (1): enrollment in Watertown Electricity Choice
- Data availability issues (3): percent of income spent on energy for households at 0–30% AMI; estimated total solar electricity produced; commercial energy use intensity (EUI) for buildings over 5,000 sq ft

Discussion

Gas/Oil-Heated Residential Properties: Councilor Offei noted that the number of gas-heated homes increased slightly from 9,625 to 9,701 against a 2030 target of 5,775. Silas Fyler explained that the Specialized Stretch Code, effective 2024, now requires any new gas connection to include full electric wiring and panel capacity, effectively preventing further growth. The prior uptick was partly attributable to construction activity during the COVID period. Commercial properties showed improvement, declining from 510 to 347 against a target of 312.

Fossil Fuel Pathway in Stretch Code: Councilor Offei noted that the Specialized Stretch Code contains a fossil fuel pathway — it incentivizes electrification but does not prohibit gas. Homes being fully renovated are still being sold with gas systems. He argued this distinction must be clearly communicated when claiming progress on this metric.

Installed Solar Capacity — Data Jump: Installed solar capacity appeared to jump from 4,521 kW to 811,902 kW. Mr. Fyler clarified this reflects a switch in data source from the Mass. CDC solar tracking program (which had significant missing entries) to DPW tracking of PPS1 and PPS2 — the original baseline was materially understated. The corrected figure is still incomplete, as it excludes installations that did not claim SMART incentives, including the city's own installations at Hosmer School and the new high school. Those facilities are not on SMART because the city elected to retain the RECs for municipal use; the new high school additionally cannot participate in SMART due to LEED Platinum certification requirements.

Solar Goals Already Exceeded: Several members noted that if the corrected data is accurate, Watertown has already surpassed its original solar goals. Staff agreed the 2030 and 2050 targets for this metric will need to be revised upward. Mr. Fyler offered to attempt to reconstruct historical figures, noting that PPS1 records do not include start dates, making this difficult.

Watertown Electricity Choice Enrollment Decline: Concerns were voiced about why enrollment in the 100% renewable option was declining. Staff explained that the standard option has been upgraded to 100% Class 3 renewable energy, causing some residents to perceive the two products as equivalent and drop to the lower tier. Additionally, some residents are opting out of the community choice program entirely to seek individually negotiated rates. Solar panel owners also represent an opt-out segment.

Assessor Database Accuracy: Councilor Piccirilli noted that the Assessor's database — proposed as a source for several metrics including gas/oil-heated properties — is materially out of date. He cited his own home as an example: a slate roof replaced in 2018 and gas heat replaced with electric heat pumps within the past year are both still recorded incorrectly. He urged the committee to address the reliability of this source before relying on it for plan metrics.

Denominator and Definition Issues: Councilor Piccirilli raised a methodological concern applicable across multiple metrics: as Watertown adds housing, per-property and per-capita denominators change over time, making gross numbers hard to interpret without context. He argued that both gross numbers and percentages should be reported, and that key terms such as "residential property" should be precisely defined (e.g., whether a 100-unit apartment building counts as one property or 100). He noted that Watertown has added approximately 500–600 new housing units since 2019, which could mean the percentage of gas-heated homes is declining even if the gross count is slightly up.

Graph Presentation — Target Lines: Brian Hebeisen raised an overarching presentation concern: while 2030 and 2050 targets are listed in tables, they are not shown graphically within the charts, making it difficult for readers to assess progress visually. He requested that target lines be added to all charts.

Proposed Metric 9 — Total Greenhouse Gas Emissions: WFC member Jolly Tager proposed the addition of a ninth metric tracking total citywide greenhouse gas emissions. This metric is not currently tracked. There was broad agreement among committee members that this metric is essential to the plan's goals.

2. Transportation and Mobility

Staff reported the following status across the five Transportation and Mobility metrics:

- Trending toward goals (3): total EVs by percentage; total population within half mile of public EV charging; number of publicly accessible EV charging stations
- Trending away from goals (1): residents using sustainable modes to travel to work (bike, walk, transit)
- Data availability issues (1): roads rated 4 or 5 stress level — analysis from the Bike and Pedestrian Plan has not been updated

Discussion

Work-From-Home as a Sustainable Mode: Councilor Offei cited WFCC's critique that counting work-from-home (WFH) as a sustainable commute mode inflates the metric while only capturing approximately 20% of total car trips. Staff acknowledged the concern, explaining that WFH was included to show totals with and without it included and to account for pandemic-era shifts. Staff indicated willingness to explore a weighted methodology.

Road Stress Level Data: The data for this metric comes from a stress-level analysis in the Bike and Pedestrian Plan, which has not been updated and has no published update date. WFCC representative Deborah Peterson suggested that as an interim measure, the city could assess a smaller subset of key north-south routes and major corridors. Staff indicated they would work with Transportation Planner Zeke Mermell to determine whether an update could be incorporated into an upcoming plan revision.

Process Concern from WFCC: Deborah Peterson noted that WFCC responded to what they understood to be a finalized published document, but additional work has since been done on the metrics, creating an out-of-sync dynamic. She suggested that some methodological questions would be better resolved through direct conversations between WFC and sustainability staff rather than through formal public meetings. Councilor Palomba acknowledged the suggestion. Ms. Kenna confirmed the metrics document has not been revised since its January 2026 publication.

3. Natural Resources

Katie Swan, Environmental Planner, presented on Natural Resources metrics. Staff reported:

- Trending toward goals (2): open space per person; area (sq ft) of school and community gardens
- Data availability issues (4): tree canopy coverage; impervious surfaces; number of public trees; air quality

Discussion

Open Space Per Capita — Data Discrepancy: The baseline figure of 3.25 acres per 1,000 people appeared to jump to 15.3 acres — well above the 2030 target of 5 and the 2050 target of 10. Ms. Swan explained that the original consultants used a methodology that could not be replicated, as it required access to a proprietary program. Staff instead used census tract data matched with citywide open space data, calculating an average. She acknowledged this is a methodological shift, not simply updated data. Figures also vary significantly by census tract — eastern Watertown shows higher open space per capita in part due to Mount Auburn Cemetery.

Definition of Open Space: WFCC noted that the distinction between open space and green space has not been defined in the plan. Artificial turf fields (e.g., BBN fields, Watertown High School athletic fields) should not be counted as natural open space for climate and ecological purposes. The committee agreed that a clear definitional framework is needed before the five-year review.

Tree Canopy Study: A tree canopy study is currently being administered by DPW with a consultant, expected to be delivered by June 30 with results likely available in July. The current baseline figure is from 2016 (20.89%), with a 2030 target of 23% and a 2050 target of 27%.

Stormwater Quality as a Metric: A member speaking on behalf of the Stormwater Advisory Committee noted that the city already collects stormwater quality data from all drains annually as part of its MS4 permit reporting. She proposed that water quality data going from Watertown's drains into the Charles River could serve as a direct and measurable indicator of the combined impact of tree canopy, open space management, and infiltration practices. Staff and the committee received the suggestion positively, noting that the Natural Resources section already includes a goal to minimize stormwater runoff and improve quality.

Open Space Equity Mapping: Councilor Gardner asked whether staff has data showing where open space gaps are greatest within the city. Ms. Swan confirmed this information exists in the raw data and offered to share it. Councilor Gardner indicated strong interest in making this information available to the full council.

4. Infrastructure and Waste

Staff reported the following:

- Trending toward goals (4): tons of trash sent to incineration; household waste generation (lbs/household/year); diversion rate (recycled tons / total tons); number of households signed up for food waste pickup
- Data availability issues (1): critical infrastructure in hazardous areas — pending the Hazard Mitigation Plan

Discussion

Food Waste Pickup Enrollment: As of March 6, 2026, 3,316 households are enrolled in the food waste pickup program.

Diversion Rate Definition: WFCC requested confirmation that the diversion rate metric includes both recycling and composting in the numerator. Staff indicated they would verify with Matthew Bacon, the city recycling coordinator, who provides the data directly from Republic Services and Waste Management.

Coverage Gap for Multi-Family and Commercial Waste: Approximately 70% of Watertown residents use city-contracted trash services; the remaining 30% — primarily large residential buildings and commercial properties with private haulers — are not captured in current data. Staff committed to researching whether other municipalities have developed methods to track waste for this segment.

5. Public Health and Community Preparedness

Staff reported the following:

- Trending toward goals (2): community members signed up for emergency alerts; customer hours of weather-related power outages
- Data availability issues (3): number of census tracts with moderate or high heat vulnerability scores; businesses signed up for emergency alerts; number of residents served by resilience hubs annually

Discussion

Weather-Related Power Outages: The data shows a dramatic improvement from the baseline figure. Staff acknowledged uncertainty about how the original metric was calculated and backtracked the data manually from annual state reports to verify consistency. The large improvement does appear to hold. Staff intends to continue using Eversource and DPW/Department of Public Utilities records as sources.

Relevance of Power Outage Metric: Councilor Bays questioned whether city actions can meaningfully move this metric, since most outage duration is determined by Eversource's infrastructure and maintenance. Staff acknowledged that city tree maintenance does have some impact but that the city is not the primary responsible party.

Heat Vulnerability Score Metric: The original data source was created for a one-time study and has not been updated. Staff has been unable to recreate the methodology and is working to identify an equivalent alternative.

Business Emergency Alert Enrollment: Emergency alert data is collected through the Watertown Police Department, which has no way to distinguish individual from business sign-ups. This metric cannot be tracked under the current system.

Resilience Hubs: The city is actively working to establish resilience hubs but has not yet finalized locations or programming. Staff noted a related grant application was recently submitted. The metric for residents served cannot be reported until the program is operational.

Next Steps

Councilor Palomba closed the presentation and summarized the path forward:

- The sustainability team will review suggestions from WFCC and councilors and incorporate revisions as appropriate in preparation for the five-year plan review.
 - The five-year comprehensive review of the Climate and Energy Plan is anticipated for 2027. Laurel Schwab returns from parental leave in approximately three weeks and will lead that process.
 - Several data sources and baseline figures require revision before the five-year review, including at minimum: solar capacity data, open space calculation methodology, and gas/oil-heated property definitions.
 - A follow-up Committee meeting may be needed to continue discussion on unresolved items.
 - Staff will work with WFCC directly to address open methodological questions, including the work-from-home commute classification and road stress data.
 - Staff will consult with Transportation Planner Zeke Mermell on a timeline for updating the road stress analysis.
 - Staff will follow up on: accuracy of the Assessor's database as a heating system data source; feasibility of tracking waste for the 30% of residents not on city-contracted collection; and historical solar capacity figures if PPS1 start dates can be obtained.
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Meeting Summary

Key Findings

- Watertown is trending toward most trackable goals. Real wins include solar growth, composting enrollment, stretch energy code adoption, and EV charging infrastructure.
- Several goals have already been exceeded — notably installed solar capacity and open space per capita — but this is largely the result of understated baselines and methodology changes, not solely new progress. Targets in these areas must be revised upward before the five-year review.
- The Specialized Stretch Code is an important policy tool but contains a fossil fuel pathway — it does not require all-electric construction. Progress claims on gas/oil-heated properties must reflect this nuance.
- The Assessor's database is not being reliably updated and should not be used as a primary data source for heating system type until its accuracy is verified.
- Total citywide greenhouse gas emissions are not currently tracked. There was broad agreement that this must be added as a metric (proposed Metric 9) before the five-year review.
- The sustainable commute metric is trending in the wrong direction, and the methodology — including work-from-home as a sustainable mode — requires reassessment.
- Definitions of “open space” and “green space” are not established in the plan. Artificial turf fields should be excluded from natural open space calculations.
- Approximately 30% of resident waste (multi-family and commercial with private haulers) is not captured in current diversion and generation metrics.

Action Items and Next Steps

- **Staff — Solar data:** Attempt to reconstruct a corrected historical baseline for installed solar capacity using PPS1/PPS2 data; report back on what is recoverable.
- **Staff — Solar and open space goals:** Revise 2030 and 2050 targets for solar capacity and open space per capita to reflect corrected baselines.
- **Staff — Assessor database:** Investigate why the Assessor's database is not being updated with current heating system and roof data, and assess its viability as a data source for plan metrics.
- **Staff — Charts:** Add 2030 and 2050 target lines to all metric charts in the report.
- **Staff — Greenhouse gas metric:** Develop a methodology and data source for tracking total citywide greenhouse gas emissions (proposed Metric 9) for inclusion in the five-year review.
- **Staff — Commute metric:** Explore a weighted methodology for the sustainable commute metric that accounts for the disproportionate share of total trips represented by work-from-home, in consultation with WFCC.
- **Staff — Road stress data:** Work with Transportation Planner Zeke Mermell to determine a timeline for updating the road stress analysis in the Bike and Pedestrian Plan, or identify an interim subset of corridors to measure.
- **Staff — Open space definition:** Establish clear definitions of "open space" and "green space" for use in the plan, ensuring artificial turf areas are excluded from natural open space calculations.
- **Staff — Open space equity data:** Share open space gap analysis by census tract with Councilor Gardner and the full council.
- **Staff — Stormwater metric:** Work with the Stormwater Committee to evaluate incorporating MS4 stormwater quality data into the Natural Resources metrics.
- **Staff — Diversion rate:** Confirm with Matthew Bacon that the diversion rate metric includes both recycling and composting in the numerator.
- **Staff — Waste coverage gap:** Research how other municipalities track waste for residents and commercial properties not on city-contracted collection services.
- **Chair — Follow-up meeting:** Councilor Palomba to schedule a follow-up Committee meeting as needed to continue discussion on unresolved items ahead of the 2027 five-year review.

Motions and Votes

No formal motions were made or votes taken at this meeting. The session was a presentation and discussion forum. The committee anticipates further action at a follow-up meeting once outstanding data and methodology questions have been addressed by staff.

The meeting adjourned 7:50 PM

Minutes were prepared by Councilor Offei