



CITY FOCUS

LOS ANGELES

The Fight of the Century

TEXT: TOH EE MING

Climate change, widening socioeconomic divides and the COVID-19 pandemic—these disruptive forces are testing countries globally. Amid the turmoil, the city of Los Angeles has proven that having a long-term plan that tackles environmental challenges together with social justice can make all the difference in securing a healthy, prosperous and sustainable future.



LOS ANGELES



Cyclists ride along Central Avenue during one of CicLAvia "open streets" events on 23 February 2020.

Image: Jon Endow / CicLAvia / Flickr





LA's Green New Deal, launched by Mayor Eric Garcetti, builds on the city's ongoing green momentum.
Image: Al Seib / Los Angeles Times

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Cool coating can reduce surface street temperature by approximately 5°C.
Image: Los Angeles Bureau of Street Services

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From deadly heat waves to raging wildfires, Los Angeles (LA) is witnessing first-hand the effects of a climate crisis. The traffic-clogged city has been ranked as the United States' smoggiest metropolitan area by the American Lung Association in 19 of the last 20 years. Beyond environmental concerns, LA also grapples with a long-standing homelessness crisis, exacerbated by the lack of affordable housing. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has added to the city's challenges. Clearly, change needs to happen—and fast.

"This is the fight of our lives," said Mayor Eric Garcetti in April 2019 as he unveiled LA's Green New Deal (GND), an urgent action plan to remove harmful emissions from the city's buildings, transport, electricity and trash. The goal is to make all new buildings emissions-free by 2030, use renewable energy for all of the city's electrical needs by 2045 and convert all vehicles to electric and emission-free models by 2050.

The GND builds on LA's ongoing green momentum. Since its first Sustainable City pLAN in 2015, the city has met or exceeded 90% of its near-term goals on time or early. With LA's comprehensive and far-sighted policies, it has emerged as an exemplar of how a clean energy economy can be built on equity and social justice. "We are putting economic fairness at the centre of our battle against the climate crisis," Mayor Garcetti said. "The Green New Deal is as much about job creation, public health, equity and economic security as it is about clean air, clean water and a safer environment."

Cooling the City

To reduce the urban heat island effect and cut temperatures by 3°C by 2035, the GND proposed an overhaul of LA's urban landscape.

First, heat-trapping streets and sidewalks, which make up 15% of the city's land, were lined with "cool pavements". Since 2015, the city has covered 50 city blocks in solar reflective coatings and seals to reduce surface temperatures. This pilot programme was later expanded to vulnerable neighbourhoods.

Second, the mayor's office appointed LA's first forest officer Rachel Malarich in August 2019 to oversee the city's largest urban forest. The project aims to plant at least 90,000 trees citywide by 2021 and increase the tree canopy in low-income, severely heat-impacted areas by at least 50% by 2028. This tree-planting effort will provide 5.67 km² of shade. Apart from capturing stormwater and lowering ambient temperatures at night, the greenery of trees will attract people and bring communities together.



Since 2007, volunteers and job trainees at GRID Alternatives Greater Los Angeles have installed over 1,800 solar electric systems for low-income families at no-cost.
Image: GRID Alternatives

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Moving Towards Renewable Energy

LA is also pushing towards a zero-carbon future. The city plans to invest nearly US\$1 billion (S\$1.39 billion) in green initiatives. It is already the top solar city in America, with some 2.4 gigawatts of installed solar and wind power capacity, enough to power 565,000 homes, and it will phase out natural gas operations at three power plants by 2029.

The urban heat island effect also poses challenges for electricity infrastructure and peak electricity management, especially for vulnerable communities without the means to cool their homes. In 2018, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power voted to spend US\$100 million (S\$138.83 million) over five years, so that 45,000 households could share in energy savings. Similarly, the California Low Income Weatherization Program gives needy households access to community solar, helping them save 40% or more in energy usage per property.

Tackling Social Equity with Green Jobs

After New York City, LA has the second-highest number of homeless people in the United States. “Angelenos are saying ‘yes’ to the housing, healing and hope our unhoused neighbours need, and the city is marshalling every resource to confront this crisis,” Mayor Garcetti told *Urban Solutions*.

LA is integrating environmental policies with solutions to social problems like low-income jobs and costly housing. The GND plans to create 400,000 “green jobs” by 2050. Over the past six years, the Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator (LACI) has created 1,700 jobs in the cleantech sector and generated more than US\$379 million (S\$526.17 million) in long-term economic value.

The clean energy sector has been one of the nation’s fastest-growing sectors. Despite a 17% employment fall in this sector in May 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a coalition led by the LACI has proposed a US\$150 billion (S\$208.25 billion) federal stimulus proposal to prioritise the clean energy industry in the nation’s economic recovery efforts.

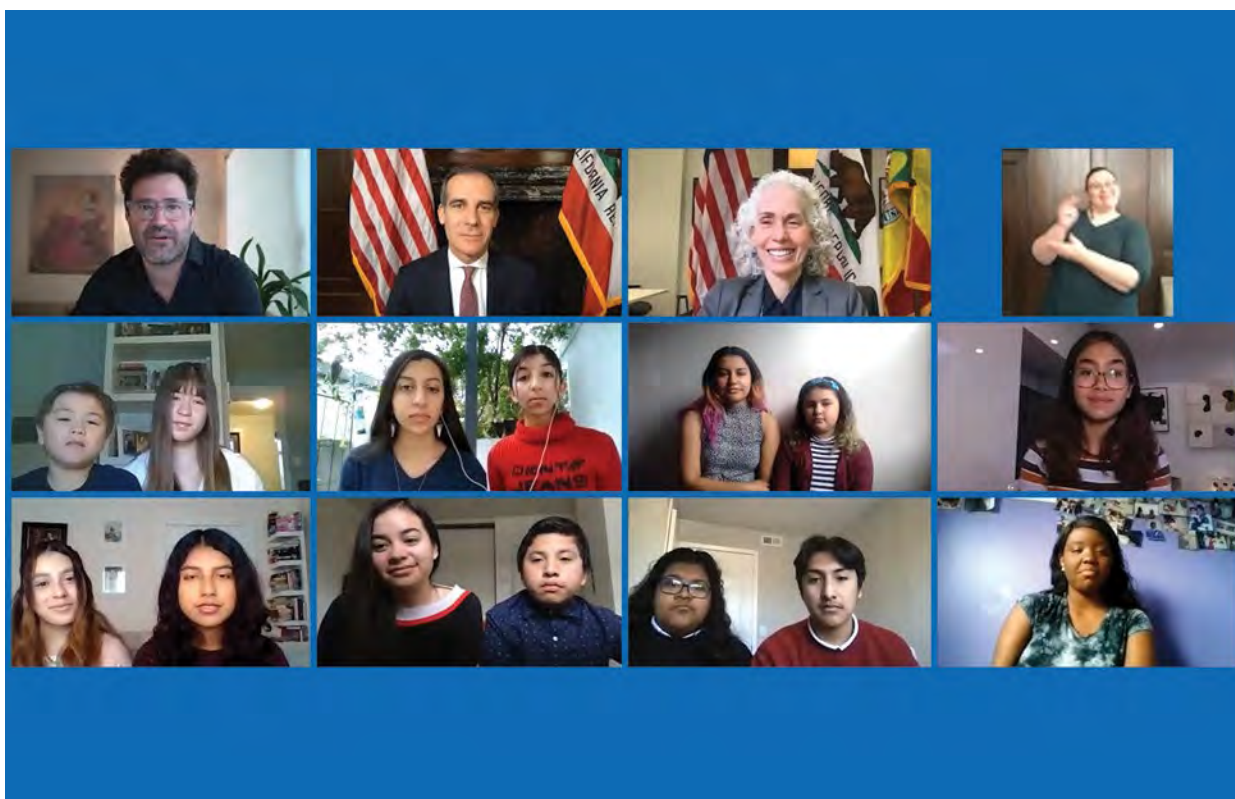


Mayor Garcetti with the Department of Water and Power as they release the final 20,000 of 96 million shade balls at the LA Reservoir in 2015. These shade balls keep contaminants out of the water and reduce evaporation of the reservoir.

Image: ZUMA Press, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo



Union Station Homeless Services and L.A. Family Housing Outreach Team conduct street medicine rounds along Arroyo Seco in South Pasadena on 21 April 2020.
Image: County of Los Angeles



Mayor Garcetti checks in with young Angelenos to hear their concerns about COVID-19 and answer questions about the future of the city and their safety.
Image: Eric Garcetti / Flickr



Los Angeles will continue to invest in a future Angelenos want their children to inherit—one that continues to provide opportunity and prosperity to its residents.



The Battle Against the Global Pandemic

Thanks to LA's large-scale social responses to the most vulnerable, it was able to move quickly to protect its citizens when COVID-19 began disrupting life in the United States in February 2020.

In April, Mayor Garcetti announced that any LA resident could get a COVID-19 test—making LA the first major US city to extend testing to asymptomatic people, beyond priority groups like frontline workers.

To prevent the virus from spreading among the homeless, LA officials launched Project Room Key and moved thousands of homeless people—many of whom were seniors or medically at-risk—from the streets to hotel and motel rooms.

Looking Ahead

LA has been nimble in dealing with immediate threats like COVID-19, thanks to policy responses it has developed to climate change and inequality.

LA is also collaborating with other cities in global recovery efforts. Mayor Garcetti is the current Chair of C40 Cities, a group of 96 mega-cities taking bold action on climate change. Under his leadership, LA has been active within the C40 networks for Climate Change Risk Assessment, Cool Cities, Private Building Efficiency, Mobility Management, Low Emissions Vehicles, Land Use Planning, Transit Development and Waste to Resources.

Sustainability and social justice have become LA's core values because of long-term planning and a newfound urgency. As Mayor Garcetti said when announcing the GND, "Los Angeles will continue to set an example, and invest in a future Angelenos want their children to inherit—one that continues to provide opportunity and prosperity to its residents." 🗨️