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Local Nonprofit's Environmental Impact in Contra Costa County

By Sophie Braccini



Lafayette senior planner Michael Cass appreciates the work done by 4CL Photo Sophie Braccini

Lynda Deschambault's passion for nature was cultivated at a young age - and it has never waned. Eight years ago, when Deschambault was vice mayor of the Moraga Town Council, the state started asking cities to incorporate a climate action plan into their code.

In response, Deschambault created the Contra Costa County Climate Leaders (4CL), which facilitates the sharing of best practices for greenhouse gas emission reduction policies in Contra Costa County cities and trains various young people. Her only regret is that her hometown of Moraga is not, in her opinion, leading the pack of climate leaders.

Lafayette Senior Planner Michael Cass says that 4CL acts as a facilitator, doing the legwork and bringing the experts to the table so staff can be educated on topics such as electrical charging stations, the PACE (property-assessed clean energy) program, and waste reduction efforts. "(The nonprofit) really has focused on educating city staff and city officials," said Cass, who until recently was in charge of environmental affairs for Lafayette. "They put on some presentations on multiple topics. They touch on a variety of issues and try to focus on what the pressing issues of the moment are. They provide the expertise and facilitate relationships with stakeholder groups."

"The councilmembers in our small town are all volunteers, and no one has the time to do the research needed to craft new legislation," Deschambault said, "so I started looking for what was already out there in terms of climate action plans that we could use. Then I created fact sheets about existing legislation that others could use on a website, and we started holding information

sessions for local municipal staff, and it's just grown from there."

The nonprofit facilitated setting up the California Youth Energy Services (CYES) program this past summer that trained young adults to conduct free energy audits in homes. "The 4CL pushed to have Lafayette participate, but it cost a minimum of \$20,000 to participate and we didn't have the budget," remembers Cass. "Then 4CL helped facilitate a grant opportunity and urged Moraga to partner with Lafayette and do a joint application so we could conduct the program without having to come up with the money." Over 250 households participated and several local youth were educated in the process.

Deschambault sees youth education as the second priority for 4CL. Over the past eight years she has hired several interns, many from Saint Mary's College. "I have political science and

environmental science seniors working with us to complete their senior projects," says Deschambault. "Others stayed with us several years and really gained valuable experience."

Jency James started working with 4CL in 2012, during her sophomore year at Saint Mary's College where she studied environmental science. "I helped plan some of the workshops, spoke at many council meetings, and met with city staff," says James. "I learned that the grassroots bottom-up approach really affects change. The plastic bag ban is a good example of it; it started in one or two small towns, then the state saw that it worked and adopted it, and now it is spreading to the whole country." James said she learned many valuable skills during her years with 4CL. "I learned how to put on an event, to create fact sheets, to do public presentations, to make our voice heard." James graduated in 2015 and now works for Republic Services as a recycling coordinator, working with apartment complex and condominium residents, among other things.

Deschambault has a full-time job with the Environmental Protection Agency, so sometimes 4CL can be a lot of extra work, but she feels that she is part of something that is bigger than herself. "Cities like Richmond, El Cerrito or even Martinez are doing so much," she says, noting that El Cerrito has added a full sustainability chapter to its general plan. She says the financial impact of projects is studied, but the environmental impact is also systematically analyzed. She sees these cities taking the lead in Contra Costa County.

As for Moraga, she says the progress has been in baby steps, but she congratulated the council on Nov. 18 when it passed the small farm animal ordinance. "It's all linked," she says. "Food production, water, waste management, all have an impact on energy production and greenhouse emissions." Upcoming topics for 4CL include open space, water, and partnerships between cities and business communities. For more information, visit <http://www.cccclimateleaders.org>.

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