

Remarks of King County Executive Ron Sims
African Cities Symposium on Climate Change
Wednesday, September 20, 2006
Nairobi, Kenya

I am honored to participate at this Africities Conference, at the invitation of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) - Local Governments for Sustainability.

I am Ron Sims, County Executive of Martin Luther King Jr. County, the largest county jurisdiction in the state of Washington, and twelfth largest county in the United States. We are located in the northwest part of the United States.

King County is astoundingly beautiful, stretching from the shores of Puget Sound to the snow-crested peaks of the Cascade Mountains. In between are 518,000 hectares containing vibrant urban centers, 760 lakes, four major river systems, 4,828 kilometers of streams, and close to 259,000 hectares of forests.

We are home to more than 1.8 million people, living in 39 cities, with Seattle the largest city. We are famous for software, airplanes and coffee, as well-known companies like Microsoft, Boeing, and Starbucks are headquartered in King County. We

are also the home to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the world's largest philanthropic foundation.

I am the elected Executive in-charge of the county government. I am responsible for 16,000 employees and an annual budget of 3.5 billion US dollars.

King County is privileged to be a core partner with ICLEI in its Climate Safe Communities Campaign in the United States. In collaboration with the prestigious University of Washington Climate Impacts Group, my office is writing a book that will become the adaptation to global warming protocols for this campaign. We are also part of a growing network of local governments determined to address the critical issues of adaptation to the harmful effects of global warming. I will talk about these elements -- the book and the power of our network -- in a moment.

But first, let me digress to say that, like you, I am here because I firmly believe in the power of collective actions by local governments to change the world. This is a key principle of the Africities summit. I hope to build upon the work of this conference

and take some of these ideas back home with me to the United States.

Second, I am here because a leader cannot speak about the critical importance of adaptation to global warming without understanding the challenges faced by people and communities in other parts of the world.

In just my short time here, I am in awe of the beauty of Africa, blissful in meeting its people, but saddened by the inequities I see being brought about by global warming. Africa faces major environmental, economic and social injustices. The most acute illustration of this to me is that Africa is the lowest emitter of global warming pollution, and yet is already bearing the largest burden of global warming impacts.

In King County, it was made clear to me by our scientists, planners, and experts that by 2050 the quality of life in our community would be significantly altered by global warming. So, as the county executive, I directed my administration to take immediate actions to adapt to the inevitability of climate change. We embraced, not debated, the science of global warming.

Our approach was simple -- think ahead and plan backward. The incremental decisions we make today should be done in the context of a 2050 environment.

I committed King County to a dual strategy of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from county operations; and, implementing aggressive clean energy standards and cutting-edge environmental management policies. The county pioneered the use of state of the art hybrid bus technology nationally. We are Washington State's biggest user of biodiesel fuel. We have conserved over 54,633 hectares of forests and green space. We are committed to securing another 40,468 hectares by 2010. We use a topographical map prepared by the Trust for Public Lands that details every parcel of land in King County. This allows us to make strategic decisions on which lands we should buy, or acquire through various conservation financing tools to protect future terrestrial, fresh water, and marine species, and flora. These forests will be our best tool to lower our carbon emissions and retain water storage capacity and robust aquifer recharge.

After we did a baseline study determining the amount of our carbon emissions, we made a decision to join the Chicago Climate Exchange, the only national carbon exchange in my

country. We are the only member county. This will allow our county to earn money by selling the market value of our lower carbon emissions projects to industries that cannot meet tougher carbon emission control standards. This offset market is worth six trillion US dollars.

Emergency preparedness will be critical during this global climate change. For example, in King County, we made a decision to plan ahead and rebuild 282 kilometers of levees to reduce the risk of flooding caused by increased rain events predicted by climatologist living in our community.

We partnered with the Cascade Land Conservancy to support their visionary effort to purchase habitat and working forests to conserve 404,686 hectares in our region by leveraging private and public financing.

We continued to use new technologies to enhance the total use of wastewater resources. We are using a bio-membrane technology at our newest wastewater plant, which facilitates our ability to generate 602,000 barrels of reclaimed water a day. This water will be used to augment flows in our rivers and streams. It will be used for agricultural and industrial purposes. We are doing this because our scientists have said we could no longer rely on the diminishing snow pack of nearby mountains to meet the needs of

people and fish in 2050. We also retrofitted one of our older water treatment facilities with hydrogen fuel cells triggered by the methane in wastewater. This is the largest hydrogen fuel cell project in the world. We did this because we needed to find alternative energy sources to power our waste treatment plants. We also use the 110,000 wet tons of waste treatment byproducts as fertilizer for our forests and agricultural lands. This reduced our reliance on chemical fertilizers.

We are using our landfills as new energy sources, burning and selling the methane to be used as an alternative power generator. We will be building a facility that will create electrical power from cow manure. The by-product will be reapplied as healthy fertilizer for our farmers.

We are aggressively using biofuels because they reduce emissions that are harmful to human and environmental health. They also create a new market for our agricultural community, crops for fuel.

We plan for growth. We encourage a well-organized pattern of growth in our cities and limit growth in rural, forested, and agricultural lands. This reduces reflective heat value and lowers our global warming impact. Dense cities do work as long as they have jobs, predictable, inexpensive and regular public

transportation service, parks, play grounds, trails, green spaces, and other amenities. I should note that we completed a seminal study that found that sprawl was physically unhealthy.

We also worked to achieve a AAA credit rating from Standard and Poors and Moody's. We needed to demonstrate to large private financial institutions that we were a professional, well-managed, fiscally prudent, transparent government committed to a solid return on investment for investors. This is the world of the 21st century finance. One ignores this at their peril when competing for the attention of worldwide capital markets.

We also started an aggressive monitoring and research effort regarding the prospect of the introduction of new diseases caused by global warming. Hanta viruses and the West Nile virus have migrated to our community because of climate change. More will follow and we want to be prepared.

King County government has not always planned for the future. Poor planning in the 1970s and 1980s allowed too many of our precious natural resources to be lost under sprawling roads and uncontained development.

In the Pacific Northwest, climate scientists predict that we will face a variety of regional impacts of global warming. If emissions are

not curbed worldwide, we as a coastal region will also face the global catastrophe of a possible 13-foot sea level rise over the next century. We need to keep communities like ours throughout the world safe from these disastrous impacts.

Earlier I mentioned a guidebook, which we are co-authoring with the Climate Impacts Group at the University of Washington. It is being published and utilized by ICLEI for their climate safe communities campaign. Let me outline this book for you.

In a straightforward how-to format, our office outlines a process on how to prepare for global warming impacts. It addresses the questions: What does preparing for global warming really mean for regions? What stakeholders have to be at the table -- from engineers to ecologists? How can a leader take the first steps of generating interest and creating an adaptation team? How does one access and use best available science and identify vulnerabilities? And most importantly, how does one develop strategies for adaptation and put plans into motion? None of these is easy, and none of our real-world examples is perfect.

But we do offer real-world examples of strategies we have undertaken: reclaimed water, forest protection, flooding protection.

But to take this from individual local action to concerted global change, we need to harness the power of networks. We look forward to establishing partnerships with cities in Africa. We need to learn from each other.

A wonderful example of the power of networks is right here in Kenya. Wangari Maathai forged critical change through a network she established tree by tree -- the Green Belt Movement.

I hope that sharing our experience in King County, in some modest way, serves as a beacon of light in your road to development. The tools we are using in King County to adapt to an age of global warming and preserve a high quality of life -- sound business practices, governmental stability and transparency, fiscal discipline, environmental safeguards, conservation of forests, clean air and water, solid waste collection and recovery systems, infrastructure investment, increased agricultural productivity, industrialization, a well educated public,

the rule of law, and strong political will – are there for you to use for your benefit.

I must emphasize this, in the long run, because government will be unable to singularly finance the solutions to global warming, only those nations, states, cities, and communities who are attractive to private investment will be healthy.

As a result of private investor pressure, water distribution systems, roads, rail transport can no longer remain the province of any single state. Just as the nations of Europe are moving as a community, so must Africa. Just as the United States is integrating trade normalization and investment with Canada, Mexico, and the nations of Central and South America, so must Africa. Just as China, India and a number of Asian nations recently agreed to normalize their efforts as a trading and investment community, so must Africa.

The need for the world to respond to global warming provides an opportunity to solidify the efforts of ICLE's Climate Safe Communities Campaign, and the United Nations Millennium Project. While these two significant efforts can provide the opportunities to create national wealth, bring an end to the

tragedies of disease, poverty and hunger, and achieve a high quality of life for all, an adaptive response to global warming is the catalyst to preserving the gains achieved by these efforts. Harsh penalties will be brought upon us if we remain indifferent to global warming.

My county was named after a great African American leader, Martin Luther King Jr. who dreamed of equality and social justice for all. Let us honor him with our dream of a new and vibrant Africa of incomparable greatness. I wish you all the best in your quest to improve your communities. Thank you. Asante.