

"Mayor Benjamin Takes on Climate Change" by Lucia Brown: The Cavalier Volume 38 Issue 1 October 2018

Mayor Stephen K. Benjamin of Columbia, South Carolina will be attending the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's 24th Conference of Parties (COP24) this December, representing cities from around the country on a global stage. Benjamin is participating both as the president-elect of the United States Conference of Mayors and as an ambassador for the leadership circle of We Are Still In. A coalition of over 3,500 leaders, from tribal leaders to governors, 2,000 companies, and almost 300 cities and counties, We Are Still In represents over half of the American population and pledges to world leaders to continue supporting and upholding the United States' former commitments to the Paris Agreement.

The Paris Agreement was reached in 2015 and addresses climate change mitigation, with one of the main goals being to keep the global temperature rise over the next century below two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit). From December 3-14 at COP24, the details and rules of the agreement's implementation will be finalized at the United Nations sponsored meeting in Katowice, Poland.

The agreement has been signed by every country in the world except the United States—after being a signatory under the Obama Administration in 2016, the country's signature was removed under the Trump Administration in June of 2017. The earliest effective date of total withdrawal from the agreement is at the end of President Donald Trump's term in November 2020. As the United States is the second largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world, the president's decision has created controversy.

"Even though America is currently not signing onto this, we have to make the effort ourselves to carry on what the effort [of the agreement] was intended to do, and we can't let our not being a part of it to prevent us from taking action," said senior Andrea Kimpson, president of the Richland Northeast Model United Nations team.

Benjamin will be at COP24 from December 7-9 as part of the Cities and Regions Summit, where he will be meeting with leaders from every inhabited continent. His presence is also considered significant because of his national prominence on his leadership in climate change issues, such as the aforementioned We Are Still In coalition.

On his involvement in COP24, senior and member of Model UN Anna Walter said, "It never hurts to have your city more involved, and in international efforts like this, just being around that shows your commitment."

Cory Alpert, senior advisor to Benjamin, added that part the importance of cities engaging with climate change action on this international platform are the needs of "a global system that's looking for US leadership in an absence of federal leadership."

Though there will be no official US Federal Government presence at the conference, there will be a small delegation from the US Congress.

In terms of local initiatives, Benjamin is one of the co-chairs of the Mayors for 100 Percent Clean Energy movement. As part of this movement, over 200 mayors from around the country have pledged to move their communities towards 100 percent clean and renewable energy. Benjamin has committed Columbia to this standard by 2036.

"I think initiatives like that are what we need in order to preserve our environment and really be cautious about how we use our resources and our energy," said Kimpson.

According to an article from National Geographic, cities constitute over 70 percent of the world's carbon emissions. Making decisions such as movement towards community solar efforts and pooling resources with other cities (in terms of purchasing fleet vehicles), some of Benjamin's goals as stated by Alpert, could begin to show measurable progress.

Alpert added, "There's a hyperfocus on Congress and the presidency as the only things that matter in the world when it comes to issues that matter to people, and while those are incredibly important, if we didn't have a great mayor and a lot of great mayors around the country, we would be in a much worse place now."

Proposed solutions include actions on a local level from students and citizens. Some, like Kimpson, emphasized that involvement in local politics and active protection of the environment can help create change.

"We have to show that we do care, we are watching what's happening, and we have to start making those changes that we think need to be made," she said.

Walter concurred with Kimpson, commenting, "For the future of our country and the world, we have a duty to cut down on what we emit."