

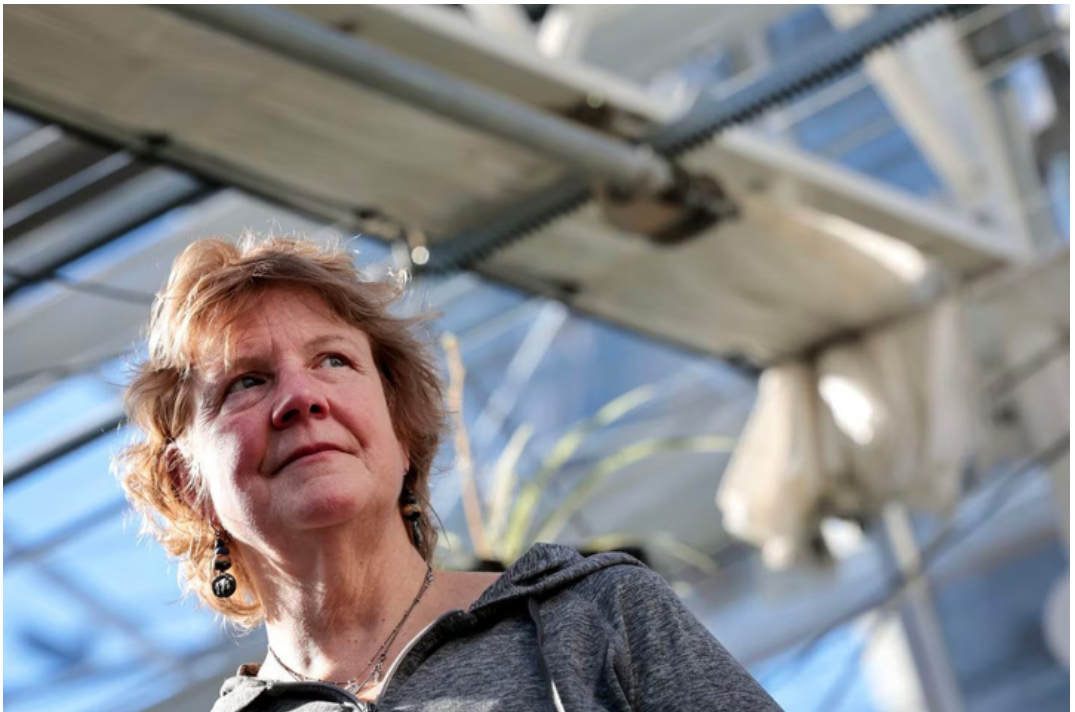
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IDEAS

Can one official move the needle on our state's carbon emissions?

Melissa Hoffer, the only state climate chief in the nation, is trying to get every government agency in Massachusetts to take responsibility for the problem. I followed her around to see how it's going.

By Benjamin Rachlin Updated March 14, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



Massachusetts Climate Chief Melissa Hoffer during a visit to the greenhouse at Eastie Farm in East Boston on March 8. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

In mid-January I went to a meeting of the governor’s Cabinet. It was the first meeting of the second year of the Healey administration, held in a conference room a block from the State House. Windows looked onto the frozen city 21 floors below.

The governor wasn’t there.

Someone else was running the meeting, a new Cabinet member. She’d been on the job as

long as the others, but the job was new — and unique in the United States. A year earlier and a block away, Governor Healey had announced a series of climate ambitions at her inauguration: doubling wind and solar energy, quadrupling energy storage, a million electric vehicles on Massachusetts roads. Achieving them would require “unprecedented focus and a leader who can get the job done.” She planned to sign an executive order to “create the country’s first Cabinet-level climate chief, reporting directly to me.”

~~The next day, she did.~~ _____

That’s who was running the meeting on the 21st floor. “Melissa Hoffer is unstoppable,” [the governor had said](#). A reporter for The Washington Post [observed](#), “Hoffer could become an influential climate official in America, and one with the unique opportunity to inject climate considerations into state agencies that have not historically focused on global warming.”

_____ For a year now, Hoffer has served as Healey’s principal adviser on everything climate, pioneering what the administration calls “a whole-of-government approach.” I kept [encountering that phrase](#): in public remarks, in executive orders, in reports from Hoffer’s new Office of Climate Innovation and Resilience. Whole of government. Clearly it was a motto, a talking point.

What did it mean? Could it work? Would it make any difference? I went to find out.



Hoffer with Eastie Farm staff members William Hardesty-Dyck, left, and Joel Seidner. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

‘Everybody has to own it’

Hoffer is an environmental lawyer, a former Environmental Protection Agency official and vice president of the Conservation Law Foundation who lives on a farm in Barre, in Central Massachusetts. She commutes to Boston in an orange Chevy Bolt. A few weeks before the Cabinet meeting, I asked why she accepted the job. She paused a full 10 seconds before answering, turning in her chair to peer at the city. “I’m just looking out the window at everything that we know, everything that we hold dear. It’s all at risk,” she said. “I don’t think people really understand the extent to which, and the rapidity with which, we will begin to lose these systems. For me it’s been very clear for a long time that we require not only innovation in policy and financing but in how government does work.”

The rationale for Hoffer’s position, for climate leadership across the whole state government at once, is scale. The climate crisis is too large, its causes and effects too

many, for any one government office to address independently. Name a department and our climate affects it – or it affects our climate. Housing, because homes release a third of emissions statewide. Economic development, because cleaner technologies will come when industry conceives of and builds them. Labor, because when the technologies come, a specialized workforce must implement and maintain them. Finance, because the transition must be paid for. Education, transportation, public safety – there are 11 executive offices, and all make the list.



Governor Maura Healey with Hoffer, right, at a press conference on the second day of the new administration in January 2023. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

“Massachusetts has been a leader on climate for a long time, and yet we are far behind where we should be,” Hoffer says. “Why is that? Because, not just in Massachusetts, climate change has been dealt with, by and large, by environmental agencies.” Federally, that’s the EPA; here, it’s the Department of Environmental Protection. Hoffer has worked as a lawyer for both. “Those people are amazing. They work around the clock. But it’s not

sufficient. All the agencies are going to be touched by climate change. They already are. Everybody has to own it.”

Among Hoffer’s first acts was to schedule a monthly meeting with all the Cabinet secretaries, specifically on climate change and its overlap with their offices, in addition to the Cabinet meeting the governor held already. Another, spelled out in the [executive order](#) creating her position, was to look around the administration and propose changes “to better align executive decision-making and action on climate matters.” In October 2023, Hoffer did so — with a formal [report](#) of 39 recommendations over almost 90 pages. Three months later I visited the 21st floor to see how the Cabinet was responding.

‘Something I wouldn’t have had on my radar’

Around a horseshoe of tables sat the secretaries, undersecretaries, and commissioners; in an outer circle along the walls sat their staffs. Hoffer nodded along to updates, prompting officials to clarify or expand. Once, she broke into applause. “Tax credits! You’re speaking Jonathan’s love language.”

At the open mouth of the horseshoe stood a screen for presentation slides. The slides named ongoing and accomplished projects. They were detailed. I couldn’t write fast enough to get them all down; it was hardly worth trying. But I knew it didn’t matter. A goal of Hoffer’s is transparency. You can read about the projects too. Across [mass.gov](#) are pages that didn’t exist a year ago describing programs that didn’t exist a year ago, all aimed at decarbonizing the Massachusetts government, or preparing for weather to come, or encouraging residents to do the same. Several offices recently did climate impact assessments on their own operations, usually for the first time. The carbon footprint of her particular office “is something I wouldn’t have had on my radar,” acknowledged Lauren Jones, secretary of labor and workforce development.

Now the labor and education departments are partnering to provide [career training](#) for clean-energy mechanics, electricians, and technicians (there’s a shortage) and a [portal](#) to

match candidates with employers. The transportation department is electrifying as many vehicles as it can: trains, vans, buses, an air fleet.

“An air fleet!” Kate Walsh, secretary of health and human services, didn’t realize the transportation department ruled an air fleet.

“If it moves, it falls under us, other than the port,” Monica Tibbits-Nutt, secretary of transportation, confirmed. “We have a state helicopter.” Then she paused, looked at Hoffer, and joked: “But it is very, very dirty, and we wouldn’t take it anywhere. Wouldn’t think of it.”



Hoffer with senior climate policy adviser Matthew Connolly, left, and assistant Sophie Collins.CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Meanwhile, a [“resilience design standards tool,”](#) a calculator that integrates climate projections with data from natural hazards, helps leaders evaluate capital investments (that’s buildings and infrastructure, mostly) before anyone signs off to build. An

[environmental justice tool](#) estimates social costs: input a location and you can learn about the local community so that benefits and burdens can be fairly spread around. “We talk a lot about net zero and goals and plans,” an assistant secretary said. “But there wasn’t a big link between those and our investments.”

Hoffer liked all that, except the word “goals.” “If you think of these not as goals but as mandates,” she said. Before becoming a lawyer, Hoffer was a high school teacher, and I thought I could see a teacher’s habits in the firm, good-natured way she asserted and cajoled. She reminded everyone of the state’s Global Warming Solutions Act, passed in 2008, ahead of the national curve. The law put a ceiling on emissions in Massachusetts, with the ceiling to lower every five years. A pair of courts upheld the law in 2016 and 2018, and in 2021 the Legislature added a requirement for net zero emissions by 2050. Officials already know the checkpoints for 2025 and 2030, plus benchmarks for how to get there. “So you can think of these not as goals but as legally binding requirements,” Hoffer repeated.

“This is a work in progress,” a commissioner agreed.

Hoffer nodded and thanked everyone. “I’m sure you all are as proud of your teams as I am.”

After an hour, heads bobbed toward the doorway, and Governor Healey walked in. Hoffer wrapped up. Now a regular Cabinet meeting began. I struck up a conversation with Hoffer’s executive assistant, who told me the afternoon agenda: a luncheon hosted by the Massachusetts Municipal Association, where Hoffer would make a presentation. Mode of travel was a sticking point. Hoffer had agreed to ride there in a car, as timing required her to do, but she insisted on walking back. That meant that her assistant, Sophie Collins, would be walking too. Collins checked a map. Forty minutes. It was 28 degrees outside. Collins was girding herself. Not that she was complaining. Collins grew up in Marblehead, left for college where she majored in economics and environmental studies,

and then returned home to try to become part of the solution. “It’s a dream come true to be part of these conversations,” she told me.

‘We should be going at it with everything we have’

Among the most significant ideas out of Hoffer’s office is the Community Climate Bank, an effort to decarbonize affordable housing. That’s “a tough nut to crack,” Hoffer explained: Massachusetts needs more housing at lower prices, but upgrades to windows, insulation, and heating and cooling methods each require upfront costs — in this case, from residents who can least afford it and to whom banks are skittish to extend loans, given their relatively small incomes, low credit scores, and statistically high risks of default.

One solution is a “loan loss reserve,” a pool of money set aside for assurances. Now if a lender offers credit for sustainable upgrades and anything goes sideways, “we’ll make sure you’re made whole,” Hoffer says. She was getting the state to put up collateral on behalf of the homeowners. The Climate Bank can also pay down interest on a loan, further reducing the burden on residents as well as the risk for lenders.

The [Climate Bank](#) launched in June 2023 with \$50 million, but by October, Hoffer was already applying to federal coffers for more. If the strategy works, the bank could attract private investors, whose money can be added to the pool. Eventually it might turn a profit to remove fossil fuels from affordable homes in a state that needs more affordable homes and less fossil fuel. Hoffer has her eye on Connecticut, which launched a similar model in 2011. For every \$1 of public money put into the [Connecticut Green Bank](#), the private sector has put in almost \$7. The result is \$2.4 billion invested in clean energy and other sustainability initiatives. In Massachusetts, a dizzying number of authorities needed to collaborate for a Climate Bank to happen. All did. “That’s one model for how this whole-of-government approach works,” Hoffer says.



Hoffer helped plant flowers during her visit to the greenhouse at Eastie Farm.CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

A few days after the Cabinet meeting, I joined Hoffer at a virtual community forum. More than 90 people attended. Hoffer explained her role, her recommendations, the Climate Bank. Many of the plans that spring from her office are open for public comment, and she implored the audience to submit feedback. Politics being what it is, Hoffer's boss, Governor Healey, often hears that a given proposal is expensive or impossible. "So she really needs to hear from people who have something at stake, like we all do, that it's important to you. To back her up. Try to use your contacts, your communities, whoever you work with. Do what you can to try to change the cultures of these places, because we all have to partner together. We have to work differently now. We don't have enough time."

She shared her email address. The forum was scheduled for 90 minutes, but Hoffer agreed to stay longer. "I want to make sure people have a chance to ask their questions."

One question had to do with places other than Massachusetts. Just how much can one state impact the climate without more support from peers or the feds?

Hoffer pointed out that the same question is being asked globally: “Why should the United States do anything when China and India won’t control their emissions? That’s been the central problem with getting an international agreement in place.” To Hoffer, the two answers are the same. “You can’t control what another state is doing. You can only control what’s happening here. You have a value that’s motivating you, and you’ve got science telling you what we need to do. It shouldn’t be ‘I’m not going to do the right thing for the planet, for future generations, because Texas isn’t doing it.’ That can’t be our basis for action or not taking action.” Plus, success is contagious: If Hoffer can show material results, she expects other states to follow Massachusetts’ lead, and for Cabinet-level climate chiefs to become the norm.

Another question was about messaging. Why was there no PR campaign for what Hoffer — the whole administration, apparently — was doing?

It was the inverse of what I’d wondered all along. In an age of greenwashing, how much of the Office of Climate Innovation and Resilience is simply optics?

But despite praise from environmentalists around New England, hardly any civilian I spoke to while following Hoffer around had any idea that her position existed or that it signals wholesale change to state governance. If the primary goal is optics, they’re doing a pretty bad job of that. You don’t put a determined lawyer in charge of a performance piece. Certainly you don’t invite her to review a governor’s administration and broadcast how she thinks it’s doing at the central cause of her career, one she regards as existential — broadcast annually, in a [Climate Report Card](#), as Hoffer is doing.

What the ‘whole of government’ really means

Hoffer aside, her role creates a structure for accountability. Every month, state decision-makers are asked what progress they can report. Sometimes they hear from experts on an

aspect of the climate crisis.

The idea is so obviously a good one that I felt like a jerk for my skepticism, then worried I'd lost a journalist's impartiality, before finally deciding that I live in Massachusetts, same as you — and the science is so plain, a livable habitat so desirable, an infusion of climate awareness into the entirety of a people's government so tangibly in the public interest, that I could probably just say these things. Why weren't we doing this already? Why isn't every state?



"Massachusetts has been a leader on climate for a long time, and yet we are far behind where we should be," Hoffer says. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

At one early Cabinet meeting, Hoffer explained the concept of atmospheric residence. Carbon dioxide doesn't come and go. It comes and stays. For decades or centuries. If tomorrow we stopped every pollutant from spilling into the air, the next day we'd still breathe some pollutants in. You have to know this to see what it means to meet a target,

what the timeline is. “We should be going at it with everything we have to reduce emissions now, because every tenth of a degree matters,” Hoffer told me.

She added, “I will always remember looking around and seeing people’s faces as they took that in. It was very moving. Like: ‘Oh. Wow.’”

In the days after the meeting, nearly every secretary emailed Hoffer privately to ask for a copy of the slide on atmospheric residence. I asked her if she thought the secretaries were enthusiastic about what she’s doing. “I think they are,” she said. “I think they’re deeply concerned.” Not just professionally — “many of them have kids.”

State officials are in our position. We are in theirs. I remember Hoffer mustering support at the community forum, how much the new approach depends on whether the public speaks up. Maybe the whole of government includes us.

Benjamin Rachlin is executive editor of [MIT Horizon](#) and the author of “[Ghost of the Innocent Man: A True Story of Trial and Redemption.](#)”

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