Cities are crucial in mitigating climate change and can serve as sites for innovations, providing examples of ways to conduct effective politics in transport, energy and land-use. What does it take to become a model for climate politics? The article argues that a few innovative measures will not suffice. A common vision based on broad legitimacy is crucial to achieve this position. Using a theoretical framework on input and output legitimacy with the City of Freiburg as the case, the article explores the political dimensions of the climate innovative city. The study shows that a specific kind of ‘green conservative’ politics and a consensual view on climate issues across parties has been very important to create political legitimacy. This has been supported by extraordinary and extensive citizen engagement in combination with the actual output i.e. what environmental policies have delivered. The legitimacy for the Green City model also means that Freiburg is viewed as a highly livable city, in turn, creating self-enforcing dynamics that challenges its innovative potential.