

Friday, February 12, 2010

Powering the Future – A panel discussion on energy use

by Ginny Lamere

“International collaboration to harvest infinite resources rather than international conflict over finite resources. That’s the vision we should be reaching for,” recommended Massachusetts State Representative William Brownsberger during “Powering the Future,” a panel on energy held in Concord last Friday. The event was the third offering of the public forum series “Life in the Balance.” In addition to Brownsberger, panelists included recycling consultant Gretchen Brewer, Dr. Warren Leon and urban planner Christopher Ryan.

Brownsberger, vice-chair of the House Committee on Global Warming and Climate Change, gave the keynote address and his message was clear. Our lifestyles and the things we pursue – large homes, large vehicles, foods from distant lands, vacations in faraway places and thick steaks – are not friendly to the environment. “Those of us fortunate to have above-the-median incomes are the bigger contributors to climate change.”

Brownsberger wants the United States to remove itself from the embroilment and international conflict that comes from trying to secure our access to oil. As he displayed an image of the World Trade Center towers in flames, a US aircraft carrier and a flag being put on a soldier’s coffin, he said, “I think this is what we should be talking about: energy independence and building a green economy.” In the future, water and productive land will become scarce resources and these problems will cause destabilization. “That threat to our way of life is what we need to be worried about.”

“We need to keep climate change in perspective. We can’t put climate change above people just getting by financially,” said Brownsberger, citing issues like poverty and hunger.

“We haven’t made a lot of progress,” said Brownsberger. Per capita carbon emissions are increasing in the U.S. and Europe. Europe’s population has been relatively flat over the last 17 years, while the U.S. has seen significant growth in the population from 250 to 300 million.” Even in Europe, where governments and people are concerned about climate change and energy efficiency, “they are significantly increasing their energy use per capita.” However, Europe has seen a slight decline in greenhouse gas emissions due to a shift from coal to gas.

Brownsberger asked us to be honest with ourselves. “We are not going to stop taking vacations” for the sake of polar bears. He does not think the way to get people to focus on

climate change is by talking about its effects on nature. “That’s not how we work. We are concerned about ourselves.”

Think local

Panelist Dr. Warren Leon recommends that towns incorporate energy goals in a broad array of initiatives to make the town a better place in which to live. For instance, he supports “helping town residents for whom energy bills are a burden and reducing energy use in town buildings and schools.” There is a program through the Council of Aging in Concord where volunteers weatherize the homes of the elderly. There are state and federal rebates for solar panels. Solar panels, Leon said, make good environmental sense and they are coming down in price.

Leon favors the stretch code developed by the Massachusetts Board of Building Regulations and Standards to improve energy efficiency. The code will increase the construction costs, but the energy savings are estimated to outweigh the costs. The stretch code is being considered in both Concord and Carlisle

Leon supports wind energy but questions whether this area has enough wind to make it profitable. He recommends buying energy from wind farms in western Massachusetts.

Leon is an adjunct professor at Brandeis University’s International Business School and co-authored “The Consumer’s Guide to Effective Environmental Choices.” He is the former director of the Massachusetts Renewable Energy Trust, a public agency that funds and advances clean energy technologies.

Recycling

Panelist Gretchen Brewer focused on the virtues of recycling. She said that 35% of waste goes to incinerators, which is not good for the climate. By reuse and recycling, three to five times the energy can be saved. Carlisle recycles 41% of its waste, Concord recycles 47%, both well above the Massachusetts average of 32%.

Brewer promotes composting food waste, striving toward zero waste and advocating for an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policy for a wide range of products. If producers were required to pay for discard management, they would have an incentive to make products and packaging more environmentally friendly.

In the tropics, large tracts of land are being clear-cut so eucalyptus plants can be grown. Brewer said the monoculture is bad for the environment and recommended not buying wood products made of tropical hardwoods. She also suggested avoiding products that contain palm oil, buying products made from recycled paper, and being content with slightly less fluffy tissue products made from recycled paper.

Brewer advocated for Massachusetts forests as they soak up carbon emissions. She said the state is subsidizing the development of five large wood-burning biomass power plants. The power plants would generate pollution and reduce the amount of forest in Massachusetts, yet would meet only 1% of the state’s energy needs, she said. See www.maforests.org.

Legislation pending on recycling

There are two bills relating to recycling that are under consideration by the state legislature. The Updated Bottle Bill (H 3515) would expand the types of containers subject to the five-cent deposit to include bottles containing water, flavored waters, coffee-based drinks, juices and sports drinks of less than one gallon in size. The second bill is the E-Waste Bill (H 833) which would make electronics producers responsible for the disposal costs.

Brewer, who has 30 years of experience in recycling, was instrumental in building recycling programs in Chicago, Massachusetts, California and New Mexico. She authored the Plastics Recycling Action Plan for Massachusetts and has a consulting business, Earth Circle Conservation & Recycling.

Sustainable transportation

Panelist Christopher Ryan talked about the role of transportation in a sustainable world. “It relies on cheap energy and facilitates the distribution of cheap energy. It serves the economy and is impacted by the economy. It enables growth and development and is a response to growth and development.”

How much energy is used for transportation? By using a measure of joules, Ryan said 95% of the primary energy used by the world is fueled by oil. The US consumes 20% of that and one quarter of that is for passenger transportation.

Ryan gave many examples of how much suburbanites use their cars to do everything. He said that Cambridge residents have a much smaller CO2 footprint, by almost two-thirds, than Concord residents because city dwellers can often walk to work, grocery stores and places of entertainment.

As we look for energy solutions, Ryan warns not to replace one finite resource with another. Substitutes, such as fuel cells and batteries need lithium, which is also a limited resource.

Ryan pointed out that as oil becomes scarce and expensive, it will take time to re-vamp the structure of society and the transportation system.

Ryan recommends “developing a new master plan with a sustainability framework emphasizing energy scarcity and transportation/land use connections and revising local zoning bylaws and ordinances to facilitate dense, walkable streets and posing significant restrictions on sprawl.”

Ryan is a principal of RELOCALIZATIONS, a planning consulting firm. He is also the Planning Director for the Town of Dedham.

The panel was sponsored by the League of Women Voters Concord-Carlisle, ConcordCAN, Carlisle Climate Action and Concord-Carlisle Adult & Community Education. The program will air on CCTV on Channel 8 and it will be available on the “Video on Demand” page of www.carlisletv.org. The Life in the Balance forum series information is online at www.lwvcc.com/lifeinthebalance.html.