

Notes from the 2009 Cool Congress Conference, Augusta Maine

Steve Erario

Plenary Session

Bill McKibben emphasized the importance of the 2 degree temperature increase (which scientists equate to 350ppm CO2 concentration) in preventing the crossing of some abrupt climate change thresholds. (We are already above 387ppm). On October 24th there will be a world-wide focus on supporting polices to achieve this target. (<http://www.350.org/>)

Suzanne Watson noted that efficiency is the near-term bridge to the transition to renewable sources of energy. Despite pursuing energy efficiency for many years the latest estimates suggest not only that plenty of opportunities remain, but that the cost has dropped, not raised, over time (now 2.5 cents/kilowatt-hour on average).

Chris Wilhite (Rhode Island) noted that transportation is one of the biggest sources of carbon and the ultimate solution lies not just in better technology. The miles per gallon improvements in technology have to a large extent been offset by increases in vehicle miles traveled (VMT). The focus must now be on reducing VMT. He suggested coupling the offering of more low-carbon (bike lanes, mass transit, walking) transit choices with land use planning to produce more dense communities that lend themselves to fewer auto trips.

John Kerry, Director, Office of Energy Independence & Security, noted the existence of a detailed comprehensive energy plan for the state that puts all the pieces together. (<http://www.maine.gov/oeis/>). He also noted that a recent ISO-NE study has a very good discussion of metrics for evaluating programs.

Dale McCormick noted a new neighborhood based program on "winterization" sponsored by the Maine State Housing Authority. As opposed to "weatherization", which is more intensive and expensive, this approach emphasizes easy do-it yourself kinds of activities that can save a lot of energy without costing much--caulking and sealing openings, internal storm windows, etc. The program hands out kits and encourages neighbors to help neighbors. She also noted that they are in the final stages of implementing a program to sell carbon credits to fund low income weatherization programs, estimating that this could cover up to 40% of the cost of weatherizing all low income housing in the state.

Rhett Lamb (Keene, NH) emphasized the need for communities to integrate adaptive planning (to adapt to the changes forthcoming from climate change that are now irreversible) with mitigation planning to increase community resilience. He pointed to such areas as building codes (including such things as snow loads for roofs), storm drain capacities, building locations, etc. as important focal points for adaptation strategies.

Some idea from the panels:

Financing ideas: San Antonio imposes a 1 cent local sales tax to finance energy efficiency, banks in Maine currently offer low interest loans for energy efficiency improvements, some utilities elsewhere (not in Maine) will finance energy efficiency improvements in the home and prorate the cost on the bill-- since the energy consumption is lower, the bills with the prorated payment are lower than before the investments; ESCO (e.g. Johnson Controls) companies will come into a town and give performance guarantees for energy reductions- the cost of the contract is paid for the reduced energy costs; Efficiency Maine has two grants targeted at communities. One, for \$10,000, is non competitive and designed to bolster planning. Another, for \$80,000, is designed to get some project off the ground. A third, targeted at regional cooperative ventures can be up to \$500,000. Communities can apply for both, but will only be funded for one. The deadline in early November, I believe he said. WATERVILLE HAS TO APPLY FOR THESE GRANTS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Organizing: Important ingredient of success--include in your group a community leader who is politically savvy and well connected who can make things happen; the Sierra Club has a program called "The Plan in a Can" that involves a prepackaged (with template publicity releases, etc) film series to educate the public about climate change and energy--they will lend it to communities; all organizers emphasized the need for committees to be inclusive, both to encourage "buy-in" but also because "you never know where good ideas will come from"; all talked about the need to have a community energy plan in place to provide a focus to the efforts and prevent the effort from being spread too thin.

Information Sources: ICLEI has lots of resources on the web for local community sustainability committees (<http://www.iclei.org/>). Clean Air-cool Planet has a two volume Handbook for Energy Committees that other committees swore by (<http://www.cleanair-coolplanet.org/>).

Targets of Opportunity: Several speakers noted that storm water treatment plants typically represent a great target of opportunity because they are such energy hogs and because new pumps are so much more energy efficient.

An excellent panel on residential energy efficiency went through the entire auditing process in some detail. It pointed out that there are three levels of audit. Level one is basically a walk thru; level two adds diagnostics (blower door and infra red camera) and provides a written report; level three adds combustion safety tests, ventilation checks, modeling of cost/benefit ratios or payback periods for various investments in energy efficiency, a written report and a "test out" to be sure the work was done right. The test out also serves as the basis for calculating energy savings.

Another speaker demonstrated how inexpensive, removable and reusable interior storm windows could be constructed for any window and pay for itself (in reduced fuel bills) in months. Some churches are sponsoring workshops to show homeowners how to build them. The speaker said once a homeowner (or renter) builds one and notices the difference it makes in reducing drafts "they are hooked".