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Cheaper energy could entice business back to Maine

BY TERRI HIBBARD
 Correspondent

Jobs. Jobs. Jobs. There was a day when mills were humming and people flocked to the Waterville area for stable jobs that paid good wages. The city manufactured things — wool, shoes, paper. Looking at those nearly empty brick hulks along the river banks, it's easy to see those days are gone.

John Joseph, however, can see the possibility of a vibrant and thriving central Maine area again. The draw, he believes, would be cheap power — power to run manufacturing businesses, greenhouses, food processing plants and who knows what else.

Joseph, a professor of economics

and finance at Thomas College, has degrees in business, a PhD in economics and a strong interest in energy that began when he was director of the Maine Office of Energy Resources in the 70s. Many people have an unpleasant recollection of that time — the oil embargo, the long lines at gas stations.

Today, Joseph leads the Energy Team of the Sustain Mid Maine Coalition.

When it comes to energy, he says, “the No. 1 priority is, of course, to conserve. We need to save the earth for our children. We have no right to destroy it.”

Conserving energy, however, means not only weatherizing buildings, turning down thermostats and driving less.

It should also include ways to extract energy from things that are available in the region, are sustainable or are now being wasted.

What's more, locally-produced energy is cheaper energy and, he said, “cheap energy is the key to economic development. That would draw business and it would draw attention to this area.”

It is common knowledge that the high cost of electricity in Maine is one of the chief deciding factors when businesses look for good locations and count Maine out. Cheap power produced by Madison Electric Works was an important factor that drew Backyard

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Farms, the tomato-growing operation with its 200 jobs, to Madison.

For many years cheaper power, along with cheaper labor, has drawn manufacturing businesses away from New England and to the South.

“The decoupling of the hydro facilities from the mills was a very important factor in the region's loss of economic advantage for manufacturing,” Joseph said. “It's interesting that Germany is one of the largest textile-exporting countries in the world and yet it has the highest labor rates.”

The Sustain Mid Maine Energy team, a group of dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers, have been meeting to explore and evaluate community energy possibilities. The first priority was setting up a plan for energy audits and weatherization. With that plan in place, when federal dollars became available the group secured a grant of

\$170,000 from Efficiency Maine Trust. Through Aug. 1, 2011, the SMMC's Residential Energy Project had done 170 free consultations.

“That resulted in 50 structures representing 94 housing units (homes or apartments) having an energy audit,” said John Reuthe, a member of the energy team and manager of the project. Of those, 29 building renovations were done at a cost of about \$500,000, much of it spent locally. Fuel savings, he said, amount to approximately 46,000 gallons of oil per heating season. The program will continue until August of 2012 or until the money is gone.

Along with conserving fuel comes the need to have cheap and locally-controlled supplies of energy, according to Joseph. Of the grant, \$20,000 has been allocated to look at the feasibility of such an operation.

“Supply is crucial,” he said. “We want to reestablish the competitive advantage we had when mills owned their power supply. We want to control

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costs and stabilize the price of energy.”

Wind power is much talked about these days, but the problem, according to Joseph, is that “wind energy goes into the grid. We’d like to see the benefits (of local power) accrue to this region.”

The concept of producing and controlling power within a locale is now called a Community Energy District, he says, the kind of thing that has been successfully done for years in Northern Europe. There are no energy districts currently in New England, but he points out that Montpelier, Vt. has an energy district for state buildings and Colby College has a district heating system that generates both heat and electricity. The college is now converting from oil to biomass, using wood chips as fuel.

If a Community Energy District

were to become a reality here, “we don’t know what kind of fuel we will use or what kind of power we will produce,” Joseph said. “The possibilities are many.” For biomass, “we’re surrounded by forests, so wood is plentiful. But we could use leaves, possibly solid waste, straw, maybe natural gas.”

Methane from waste treatment plants could be an energy source, as could methane from cows on large farms.

“Tremendous amounts of waste steam are generated by thermal electric power plants in Maine,” Joseph said. “That steam is often piped through cold ocean water in order to cool it. There may be enough heat going into the Gulf of Maine to heat every home in New England. Waste heat could heat greenhouses, make ice, provide the climate control for data centers.”

In Maine, approximately \$5 billion a year leaves the state as we purchase gas and oil. The energy team would like to keep a good chunk of that



Contributed Photo

money here by creating cheap power from the resources at hand. Money that stays here circulates and multiplies.

“We love the multiplier effect,” Joseph said.

To learn more about this project or other Sustain Mid Maine initiatives, visit www.waterville-me.gov/departments/mmssc.

Sustain Mid Maine Energy team members who were involved with obtaining a \$170,000 grant. The money is being used to offer rebates for energy audits and explore the feasibility of a Community Energy District: (l. to r.) Ken Fletcher, Elery Keene, John Joseph, Dick Thomas and Steve Erario.

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