

VALLEY NEWS

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As Goes Keene . . . So Goes the Nation?

Across New England, many communities are struggling with rising energy prices. But at least one New Hampshire community has made energy efficiency standard operating procedure and is enjoying the benefits of lower energy bills. Keene, just south of the Upper Valley, embraced energy efficiency not only to save money but also to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to combat the threat of global warming.

Over the past five years, residents and officials in Keene have become increasingly concerned about the potential impact of rising temperatures on everything from skiing and other winter recreation to fall foliage, maple sugaring and cold-water fishing, all of which attract tourists and business to the city and to the region.

Well before the northward spread of West Nile virus and last October's devastating floods reinforced the need for local action, Keene decided to address the threat of global warming by becoming a member of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives and its Cities for Climate Protection program. The group includes 60 cities and towns in the Northeast, as well as hundreds of other local governments around the world, all dedicated to solving global warming and preventing further environmental problems.

As a first step, Keene completed an inventory of current energy use and measured emissions; then, in 2004, it adopted an "action plan," a list of measures to reduce greenhouse gases.

Specifically, Keene implemented a campaign to reduce by 2015 the city's carbon emissions by 10 percent below 1995 levels; the city's municipal operations will go further and attempt to reduce emissions to 20 percent below 1995 levels. If all goes according to plan, the city could reduce emissions by more than 70,000 tons over the next 10 years.

Some of the steps Keene has taken are as simple as upgrading streetlights and using biodiesel fuels in the municipal fleet (soon, the school district's buses will run on biodiesel as well). The city's "anti-idling" campaign -- city workers have been told never to let an engine idle -- has cut fuel use by 6 percent, despite the increased use of cars and trucks after last fall's flooding, according to Keene's chief planner Rhett Lamb. Methane collected at the city's landfill from the solid waste actually powers that facility, which now operates off the grid (methane is a significant greenhouse gas). And a new geo-thermal system, using no fossil fuels, heats the public works building.

These initiatives will reduce greenhouse gases; they will also reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil, decrease pollution that contributes to asthma and other respiratory illnesses, and save taxpayers money.

New Hampshire imports most of its energy -- more than 50 percent of the state's energy and more than 80 percent of energy costs are derived from petroleum. The state's reliance on importing the majority of its energy makes it vulnerable to outside political forces and economic fluctuations and robs the economy of its full potential.

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Money spent within the state and put into the local economy generally stimulates more local and regional economic activity. If residents could reduce fuel use and replace imported fuels with local energy sources, as much as \$4 billion in additional economic activity could be generated in the state, according to the state's Office of Energy and Planning.

These economic predictions should spur New Englanders to action. By conserving energy and investing in local fuel sources, such as wind, geothermal, solar and bio-fuels, towns and cities in the Upper Valley and throughout New England could become models of self-sufficiency and energy security. This is not just a fanciful notion. Successes in communities such as Keene bear out the value of conservation.

Here are a few other examples of how New Hampshire towns are reducing greenhouse gases by addressing energy consumption -- and their energy budgets:

In Hanover, the Richmond Middle School depends on wood chips from local lumberyards for heat, as will the newly renovated high school. The heating systems, the first in a New Hampshire public school system, are expected to save the community more than \$60,000 a year on energy bills, while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions by nearly 1,000 tons a year. The wood chips will displace about 115,000 gallons of fuel oil consumed each year.

Manchester replaced more than 3,300 traffic lights with energy-efficient light-emitting diode (LED) traffic lamps, which use 80 to 90 percent less energy, saving the city nearly \$100,000 a year.

In Somersworth, the housing authority joined housing authorities in Lebanon and Keene in a so-called performance contract in which an energy company agrees to retrofit city buildings in exchange for a share of the savings realized through greater efficiency. The Somersworth housing authority is now saving more than \$45,000 a year thanks to energy-saving lighting and other energy improvements at its 169 housing units. The upgrades, completed last fall, are expected to save the town \$540,000 over 12-years.

When you look at the dollars saved, and consider that these are taxpayers' dollars, the reason for action is clear. It's important to keep in mind, though, that the impetus for action is more than just saving money. It's about reducing harmful emissions and improving energy security as well.

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The writer is program manager for Clean Air-Cool Planet in Keene, N.H. She spoke May 30 in Claremont about how local communities are addressing climate change. Clean Air-Cool Planet, a nonprofit working in nine states, teams up with the Cities for Climate Protection program.

[Back to the story index](#)

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