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Grassroots global warming article to hit town meetings

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CONWAY — Enough signatures in Conway, Bartlett and Jackson have been collected to put an petition on energy-saving and carbon emissions before the voters at next year's town meetings. The petition was drafted by Carbon Coalition, an offshoot of the New England-based Clean Air-Cool Planet organization. The coalition was formed this year to create a statewide consensus on the danger of global warming and the necessity of federal action.

The coalition is seeking this consensus town by town; volunteers are circulating petitions throughout the state, hoping to get an article on each town warrant early next year through this grassroots effort. If the majority of the state passed the article, global warming would become a proven priority to the people of New Hampshire. Carbon Coalition hopes this would press presidential candidates to address the issue seriously in their up-coming campaigns.

The lengthy petition asks individual towns to push the federal government toward addressing climate change through a series of actions: the establishment of a national program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the creation of a national research initiative to speed up the development of "sustainable energy technologies." The petition presses for local action, too - the petition encourages selectmen to form an energy committee and seek out ways to reduce emissions and save energy locally.

Chuck Henderson, of Conway, organizes the signature-gathering in Carroll County. Enough signatures have already been gathered in Conway, Bartlett and Jackson to get an article on the March 2007 warrant (the signatures of 25 registered voters are required, but Henderson gathered 40 per town "just in case some overly enthusiastic people who aren't registered signed their names").

"It took just one afternoon to get those signatures in Jackson," Henderson said. "It took about 90 minutes in Conway." Henderson said polling stations are the best place to seek signatures - he plans to make petitions available in different towns during the November elections. "This is a totally non-partisan thing, so you can usually get a mix of registered voters," he added.

This is not the first grassroots effort to blow through New Hampshire in the face of public concern for the environment. In 1983, a similar town-by-town petition circulated throughout the state; in the end, almost 200 towns passed a resolution on acid rain.

While the coalition hopes that the states' potentially documented concern over global warming will make the issue unignorable at a federal level, the petition also aims for action at a municipal level. "On a local level, I don't think you'd have to come down very heavy-handed on regulations," Henderson said. "A sub-committee could set up best practices and guidelines for energy use. Many of the changes you can make cost very little up front, and the payback is very quick," he added.

Selectmen can and do establish voluntary for a variety of projects: the Citizen Design Review Committee, an affordable housing committee and an ambulance committee have been created to address specific issues in detail.

The Carbon Coalition's petition suggests that selectmen from each town form a voluntary committee to "recommend local steps to save energy and reduce emissions."

It's certain that the global warming article will be on at least every warrant in Carroll County by next spring, said Henderson.