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Acting Locally

In general, Town Meeting votes ought to be reserved for questions that are truly local: how much to spend on public roads, whether to buy a new plow truck, when municipal employees should get a raise. But once in a while, a broader issue comes along that deserves a place in our annual exercise in participatory democracy.

Global warming is such an issue. Created by massive energy consumption and ignored by the Bush administration, the planet's alarming rise in temperature constitutes a genuine crisis. Because politicians of both major parties have failed to take adequate steps to address the problem, ordinary citizens have a right -- a duty, even -- to make their voices heard.

With that goal in mind, a coalition of environmental groups and individuals is trying to place a non-binding resolution on next spring's Town Meeting agendas and municipal ballots around New Hampshire. The resolution, sponsored by the Carbon Coalition, would call on the president and Congress to take action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and develop cleaner energy sources.

The coalition says its effort crosses party lines. "We wanted to work with the issue of global warming ... in a way that didn't box a party in or isolate a party," said Roger Stephenson, one of the organizers. "We've learned that while America is not interested in real solutions to global warming, Americans are."

The Carbon Coalition effort builds on other initiatives to take local action and increase national pressure on President Bush, who rejected the international Kyoto Protocol five years ago. In August, New Hampshire Gov. John Lynch set a goal for the state to get one-quarter of its energy from renewable resources by 2025. Last week, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill to cap that state's greenhouse gas emissions.

Although the proposed New Hampshire resolution has no legal weight, it could give a significant political boost to a populist campaign. And it doesn't just give local voters a chance to opine globally; it also calls on elected town officials to form energy committees that would identify local ways to reduce energy consumption and pollution locally.

Individuals can make a difference, too, by switching to cleaner cars, sharing rides to work and making meals from vegetables and other foods that are raised locally

instead of shipped -- at significant energy cost -- from other parts of the country and world. They can also, of course, make a difference at the ballot box in November by electing candidates who will do more than pay lip service to the problem.

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