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BOB DOPPELT: Economy of conservation creates local opportunities

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Eugene's economy continues to sputter. But local residents have, almost without realizing it, captured a big economic development opportunity. A concerted effort might produce even greater benefits. I'm not talking about recruiting a new business. I'm talking about energy conversation and substitution.

Data provided by the city of Eugene's Climate and Energy Action Plan's 2011 Progress Report shows that gas and diesel use are down 14 percent over the past seven years. Every gallon of unused fuel represents a cost savings for local residents.

This statistic is even more remarkable when you consider that the city's population grew by about 13 percent over that period. So cuts in per capita fuel consumption are much higher than the aggregate reduction.

Greater benefits might be possible in the future. City of Eugene staff members estimate that even with reduced fuels use, Eugene residents and businesses still spend approximately \$200 million annually on gas and diesel. About 70 percent of those dollars — or \$140 million — immediately flow into the pockets of out-of-state oil producers. That means those dollars no longer circulate through the local economy. If fuel consumption can be reduced even further, more of our money will stay home and be available for other uses.

But wait. There's more. Over the past 10 years, electricity use in Eugene has dropped 15 percent. Natural gas use is down 14.5 percent over the past five years.

Each reduction cut the cost of energy for local residents. As a result, local greenhouse gas emissions are going down.

The city's Climate and Energy Action Plan cannot claim credit for these savings. After all, it's just one year old. The slowdown in the economy likely has played a role. But the downward trends began long before the economy collapsed in late 2008. That suggests that something else is going on as well.

Matt McRae, who coordinates the city's plan, told me he believes one of the drivers is local residents' high awareness of environmental issues. Concerned citizens are more likely to

engage in conservation measures such as walking, biking and riding the bus, and to increase the energy efficiency of their homes and offices. They also will trade gas-guzzling vehicles for more fuel-efficient models. Awareness and mindfulness are powerful drivers of change.

If attentiveness to environmental concerns can be coupled with a sustained focus on energy savings and emission reductions, the economic benefits that already have accrued certainly will grow even larger. That's one of the benefits of the plan.

Launched just more than a year ago after it was endorsed by the City Council, the plan has three overall goals: reduce community-wide greenhouse gas emissions 10 percent below 1990 levels of 2020; reduce fossil fuel use by 50 percent by 2030; and help the community prepare for climate change as well as likely increasing costs of fossil fuels. If the current downward trajectory of fossil fuel use and emissions continues, the city will achieve its goals.

According to McRae, much of the first year was spent getting teams organized and responding to opportunities, such as linking the action plan with Envision Eugene, the city's comprehensive land use planning process. Nevertheless, important progress was made.

For example, the city wants 90 percent of its residents to live in "20-minute neighborhoods" by 2030. These are areas where residents can meet their daily needs in 20 minutes or less without relying on a car.

City staff found five "hot spots" where such neighborhoods exist or are possible. They include the downtown area, the Whiteaker neighborhood, the University of Oregon area and the areas around 24th Avenue and Hilyard Street and 29th Avenue and Willamette Street. These regions cover a large portion of Eugene's population. Yet the assessment also found many other parts of town that do not approach the 20-minute criteria.

Decisions are being made about the best way to establish "20-minute neighborhoods."

The city's internal climate action plan also continues to move forward. For example, a variety of fuel-efficient vehicles are being examined for use by the police department. The less gas consumed, the more money taxpayers save.

Energy, waste and emissions reduction save money and open the door to new economic opportunities. As Eugene and other communities seek ways to create business and job opportunities, conservation and substitution should be priorities.

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