

Officials would act locally on climate

By Bob Doppelt

For The Register-Guard

Published: August 13, 2008 12:00AM

Climate change is a global problem. The effects, however, will be felt locally. Many of the solutions to the crisis also must take place at the local level. Local governments, therefore, play a crucial role in determining how climate change unfolds.

Given the stakes, I thought the public might want to know where their local officials stand on the issue. So, I e-mailed a questionnaire to city council members in Eugene, Springfield and Florence and to the Lane County commissioners. I asked five questions:

Do they believe the Earth is warming beyond natural levels? Do humans play a role in today's warming? Should their agency play a role in reducing local emissions, and if so what type of role? Should their agency prepare for the consequences of climate change?

The response rate was good. In general, the views of the officials that replied tracked traditional conservative and liberal positions. There were, however, some exceptions.

All of the Lane County commissioners responded, and four of the five said they thought the Earth was warming unnaturally and that humans were the cause. One was not sure about the science, but wanted to learn more.

For different reasons, the commissioners unanimously agreed that Lane County should do what it can to cut greenhouse gas emissions. One official, for example, not typically considered part of a liberal contingent, said the county liked to be a leader and that many things the county did in the past needed to change. All of the commissioners said the county should take steps to prepare for climate change.

Half of the Springfield City Council responded to the questionnaire. One councilor was clear in saying that he did not believe in global warming. The others ranged from being unsure to being convinced that warming was real and that humans play a major role.

All but the official who disagreed with warming said that the city should reduce its internal emissions and help the community do the same using incentives and other tools. These councilors also thought the city should prepare for warming.

Councilor Joe Pishioneri's said, "If it's predictable, it's preventable."

Four of the eight Eugene city councilors responded, including one who would not be considered part of the "liberal" wing. Each said global warming was real, that humans were a major cause, and that the city should reduce its own emissions and help the community do so as well.

They all also said the city should prepare for warming, but no one thought much was happening on this front.

Florence City Manager Bob Willoughby responded for the city council with a yes to all questions. His answers highlighted some of the common themes I heard from officials countywide.

One commonality was that many officials think global warming must be resolved elsewhere, not locally. A number of officials questioned the significance of local emission reductions and said the problem must be resolved through international treaties.

That position suggests a misunderstanding. Oregon's 2004 emissions of 67.5 million tons of greenhouse gasses were larger than those of many entire nations. Cutting local emissions will make a difference.

Local officials also said that the federal government has financial resources to address global warming, while local governments are struggling to maintain basic services. County Commissioner Bill Fleenor summarized this concern: "It's hard to think about where we are headed when we can barely keep our heads above water."

A few people had a slightly different view, saying that many changes could save money and increase productivity.

Still other officials said the feds must take the lead so that local governments nationwide operate under the same rules and no community is disadvantaged. This is important. Yet, because it spurs innovation and improves quality of life, cities such as Portland and Seattle that are out front on emission reductions are drawing new businesses and investments; that way, rather than a disadvantage, climate action could become a powerful economic draw.

Lack of expertise was another common concern. Few officials thought their staffs have sufficient know-how or tools to effectively reduce emissions or prepare for

climate change. The need for education and training stood out.

So, what did I learn?

The majority of officials who responded to the questionnaire acknowledged that global warming poses risks. Although some feel regulations are needed and others prefer incentives, the vast majority support reducing emissions and preparing for the consequences of warming.

Of course, the officials who failed to respond may have opposing views. Nevertheless, it seems that a good deal of political support exists for engaging in climate protection and preparation.

HHHH

Bob Doppelt (bob-cwch@att.net) is director of resource innovations at the University of Oregon; he also directs the UO's Climate Leadership Initiative. He is writing a series of columns on climate change for The Register-Guard.

Copyright © 2008 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA
(<http://regweb.registerguard.com/rga/index.php/info/copyright>)
