Taking Inventory

"Minneapolis achieved the pollution reduction necessary to meet the Kyoto Protocol, one of the first cities in the nation to do so - a strategy that has earned our City tremendous environmental and economic benefits" *-- Mayor R.T. Rybak, City of Minneapolis, MN*

The first challenge of a city that has committed to meeting or beating the Kyoto Protocol, is to fully understand its current state of affairs. This means to "Inventory global warming emissions in City operations and in the community, set reduction targets and create an action plan," according to the Mayor's Climate Action Agreement.

What does it mean to inventory global warming emissions on a city level?

Fortunately, the organizations which are promoting the Climate Action Agreement, most notably ICLEI, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, are trying to make this as painless as possible. On their CoolMayors.com site, they offer a "Blueprint for any city," outlining the steps to take, examples of what other cities have done, technical support, and links to software specifically for conducting city inventories.

City inventories start with city operations. They look at the efficiency of city buildings and vehicles, all city-owned infrastructure (street lights, traffic lights, etc.), procurement, waste handling, water management, etc. All city operations have some resulting carbon effect. The inventory identifies and quantifies that effect. Once the "carbon footprint" of the city operations has been identified, the next step is to look at the carbon footprint of the community as a whole. This includes businesses, industry, schools, and private residences. The inventory is taken for a "base year", and then a projection is made for a future year. With this information, the city can identify its reduced emissions target, and go on to form an action plan for meeting that goal. Many cities set up some version of a "Green Ribbon" task force, with members representing local government, colleges, businesses and industry, non-profits and labor groups, to oversee the development of the inventory, and resulting target and action plan.

Is this breaking city budgets and putting restrictions on business and industry?

To the contrary, cities are finding substantial cost savings as they review their operations. By increasing their energy efficiency, they have lowered their operating costs – a welcome change for any city budget – and are positioning themselves well for the shift to renewable energy. These cities are leading by example as they become more sustainable themselves. In setting goals for the community, they inspire local businesses and industry to look for their own savings potentials. By being proactive about joining the new sustainable energy economy, these cities signal to businesses and industry that they are on the cutting edge, ready to tackle the coming economic challenges.

What does this mean for city residents?

Cities who take on this challenge try to make it easier for their residents to reduce their carbon footprint in a number of ways. They provide "What can I do?" information for individual households and businesses, they improve walking and biking opportunities, they manage waste in a way that makes it easy for private households to recycle and to compost yard waste. Sometimes they offer incentives for use of mass transportation, or parking privileges for energy efficient vehicles. The city of Bowling Green even went so far as developing their own wind-powered public utility to provide a renewable energy option for their residents.

Individual households can also take inventory and develop a checklist of changes to make, as they are able. This is something many people have probably already started in order to regain some control over their heating bills. Climate change just provides the motivation to check a few more items off of the list (at least I know it does at our house).

Here are some resources for residents:

A nifty carbon footprint calculator at www.Climatecrisis.org roughly assesses the amount of C02 one's lifestyle produces; or you can perform an online energy audit of your home or business at the EPA's EnergyStar website. The Ohio Department of Development offers a free Small Business Energy Saver program online. The US Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) website offers a variety of checklists for new construction, renovations and greening of existing structures. For lower-income households in Ohio, in-home evaluations and weatherization services are available for little or no cost (call 1-866-728-6749). The federal government is offering tax breaks for increasing your home or business' energy efficiency, so keep your receipts for any improvements or EnergyStar equipment.

Taking inventory is a way for all of us to start - at the city level, or at home. Knowing where we are allows us to set realistic goals for where we would like to be. With a target, we can take aim, and take action.

For anyone interested in learning more about the growth of renewable energy technology and industry in Ohio, and about the cities, colleges, and businesses in NE Ohio who have taken on the climate challenge, set aside the morning of March 29th 8:30 A.M. -12:30 (registration and refreshments at 8:00 A.M.) for the Seminar "Building Sustainable Communities: What's Your Carbon Footprint?" at the Hoover Price Campus Center, Mount Union College. This event, hosted by the Mount Union Students for Environmental Awareness, and Keep Alliance Beautiful, will feature six speakers who are catalysts for sustainability in NE Ohio. Contact Mona Henderson for information and reservations at (330) 823-3254.