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A Legend of the '60s Points the Way, Again

By Anahad O'Connor

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WOODSTOCK, N.Y., March 14 — In a small community center on a placid night, 30 residents of this iconic left-leaning town in a corner of the Catskill Mountains gathered to plot a revolution.

There was no mention of drugs or sex or music, and few, if any, of those in the crowd of mostly baby boomers bore any resemblance to the flower children who flocked to the festival that turned “Woodstock” into a bohemian brand name four decades ago. These residents’ new countercultural project was environmental: a resolution to reduce net carbon emissions in all of Woodstock to zero — yes, zero — within a decade.

Forget for a second the question of whether such a goal is even feasible. In this crunchy town of art galleries and funky shops, where people get around on colorful bikes and storefronts post signs like “hippies always welcome,” proponents say that if anyplace can reduce its carbon emissions to zero, Woodstock will be it.

There are those who concede that the resolution, which was approved unanimously by the Town Board on Tuesday night, has a pie-in-the-sky element to it.

But it is tough, if not downright impossible, to find anyone around here who does not applaud Woodstock for trying.



Randolph Horner, a renewable energy developer, among the solar energy panels atop the Woodstock Town Hall.
Susan Stava for The New York Times

According to the resolution, the town would create a task force to inventory energy use and make recommendations for improvements by 2017. The resolution also seeks to promote the development of renewable energy resources, encourage homeowners to use solar power, improve the efficiency of town vehicles and increase recycling programs.

Randolph Horner, a member of the Woodstock Environmental Commission and an author of the measure, said the town chose the decadelong timeline because scientists who study global warming say the world has 10 years “before reaching an irreversible tipping point.”

That may be. But zero carbon emissions?

It is not as unrealistic as it sounds, insists Mr. Horner, a renewable energy developer. Woodstock has already installed a solar-heating system, consisting of 112 photo panels atop Town Hall, that provides so much power to the building that it kicks excess energy to the local power grid. A similar mechanism is being installed in the town's large public parking garage.

Similar plans for other buildings are in the works, and the town also has ended the use of propane fuel at its wastewater treatment plant.

Now, the sponsors of the resolution say, the key is to encourage individuals to take similar steps, whether by riding bikes instead of driving or taking advantage of tax incentives to make their homes more energy efficient.

Even if Woodstockers keep driving gasoline-powered cars and heating their homes with oil, Mr. Horner says, the town can reach net zero emissions if it creates more power than it uses.

"The plan is that we'll make so much clean energy with our solar arrays and geothermal heating that it will offset the gasoline that we burn," he said. "We're trying to set a template for other towns throughout the region to follow, and we're doing that with the magic of the Woodstock name."



Woodstock wants to reduce net carbon emissions to zero by 2017.
The New York Times

In recent years, plenty of towns and cities have acted to reduce emissions. Last year, voters in Boulder, Colo., approved the nation's first "carbon tax," revenue from which would fund efforts to increase energy efficiency in homes and buildings.

Portland, Ore., was the first American city to adopt a strategy to deal with climate change when it began a campaign in 1993 to cut carbon emissions, offering financial incentives to anyone constructing a "green building" with built-in energy efficiency.

As a result, Portland was able to reduce emissions below the benchmark set by the international Kyoto Protocol, which seeks to curb global warming.

Some people here say Woodstock's carbon-cutting movement began a long time ago but never picked up steam. At the meeting on Tuesday, Jay Wenk, a former councilman, reminded the board of a resolution he introduced 15 years ago that called on town employees to shut off vehicles that were left to idle for more than a minute. The resolution passed unanimously, but apparently to no avail.

"I guess I was a little ahead of my time," Mr. Wenk said. "It was never put into practice."

Brian Shapiro, an Ulster County legislator, said the county had plans to hire an energy czar and create a global-warming task force, suggesting that other towns would look to Woodstock to set an example.

"Woodstock has always been ahead of the curve," he said, "so this is keeping with tradition."

Liz Simonson, a Town Board member, said she was surprised that the resolution had become a hot topic of conversation, particularly among younger residents, in the diners and cafes along Tinker Street, Woodstock's main thoroughfare.

The resolution may largely be symbolic, she said, "but symbolism has a lot of value."

"It's a signal to the rest of the world that we are serious about trying to reverse the effects of global warming and our misuse of natural resources," she said. "But this resolution is probably going to be the easiest thing that we do. The hardest decisions lie ahead."

Woodstock's next act: End carbon emissions

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Counterculture town aims to fight warming by curbing greenhouse gas

By
Michael Hill

AP Associated Press

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WOODSTOCK, New York — Michael Esposito rides his bike all the time — from cold nights when leaving his old job at a natural food store to warm days while passing shops selling yoga clothes and soy drinks.

So the 67-year-old is excited about a new plan to reduce this countercultural haven's net carbon dioxide emissions to zero within a decade, an ambitious attempt to erase the town's "carbon footprint."

"It's more than important," Esposito said. "It's a necessity."

The goal might sound as unlikely as stuffing smoke back into a smokestack. Even sympathetic experts call it challenging. It likely would require many of the town's roughly 6,200 people to install solar panels and geothermal hookups. But it's tough to find a resident who doesn't support the project.

"So why not declare that within 10 years we're going to set a visionary goal?" asked Randolph Horner, a renewable energy project developer who is a driving force behind the initiative.

Woodstock is best known for the 1969 rock concert that borrowed its name and was held some 50 miles away in Bethel. But the old artists' colony is plugging firmly into the zeitgeist of 2007, a time when hybrid cars are hot and Al Gore's climate-change documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," won two Oscars.

In February, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change expressed its greatest confidence yet that global warming is being caused largely by the accumulation of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere, mostly from the burning of fossil fuels.

Last week, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the federal government is not doing enough to curb emissions.

As debate over the scope of global warming continues, local officials across the country have crafted their own policies. Austin, Texas, has a "Climate Protection Plan" that aims to make city buildings reliant on renewable energy by 2012. Portland, Ore., has an Office of Sustainable Development to coordinate and encourage the use of everything from green building to biofuel.

'No net emission' goal

Last month, the Woodstock town board approved a nonbinding resolution that called for "implementing policies resulting in no net emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases" by 2017.

"Net" means residents can keep their cars as long as they produce enough clean power to offset their emissions.

The resolution lists ways to reach the zero carbon goal, including green building, bike paths, tree planting and biodiesel municipal fleets.

It's the sort of bit-by-bit approach advocated by environmentalists. For instance, one person driving 2,000 fewer miles prevents about a ton of carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere. And a compact fluorescent bulb will keep half a ton of carbon dioxide out of the air over its lifetime, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The savings are a wisp compared with the billions of tons of greenhouse gases released annually, but the idea is to reach meaningful reductions through collective action.

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Randolph Horner poses with solar panels on the roof of the town hall in Woodstock, N.Y., to help reduce Woodstock's net carbon dioxide emissions to zero in 10 years.

Horner said consumer efficiencies should be coupled with onsite generation like solar power. Geothermal heating and cooling systems would take a bite out the town's appetite for fossil fuel, he said.

Renewable energy experts say the goal is technically possible but difficult. Michael Armstrong, a policy analyst with Portland's Office of Sustainability, called net zero a "monstrous challenge."

But Horner insists that as fossil fuel prices spike over the next decade, alternative energy will become more attractive to both producers and residential consumers. Solar panels and geothermal systems will make more sense economically, he said.

Woodstock has some advantages bigger cities like Portland or Austin do not. It's a rural town with no heavy industry, and residents generally tend to be more sympathetic to save-the-planet ideas.

For it, but skeptical

Those asked about the plan were all supportive of the general idea.

"Climate change is serious. We can't stick our heads in the ground," Norm Wenne said.

"What's not to like? How could anybody be against it?" Robin Kramer asked. "I'm just skeptical that it will work."

Kramer said he supports the effort, but doubts people will cut down on driving and make other sacrifices necessary to reach the goal.

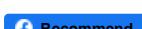
Jim Decker, a member of the group charged with coming up with more concrete plans, says one potential problem could be enlisting the many people from New York City who keep weekend homes in Woodstock.

And even residents who support the plan are foggy about how to wipe out their carbon footprint.

Alan Carey said he switched to compact fluorescent bulbs, burns more wood and tries to drive less.

"I don't know if we can do it," Carey said, "but we're going to try."

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Michael Esposito, seen at his bike shop in Woodstock, N.Y., reduce Woodstock's net carbon dioxide emissions to zero