

REGAL COURIER

Views mixed on climate change strategy

Business leaders critique proposed city/county plan

BY JIM REDDEN

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Portland is far from meeting a looming 2010 goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 10 percent below 1990 levels, despite impressive progress in recent years.

But now Portland and Multnomah County are turning it up several notches, with a joint Climate Action Plan that calls for slashing greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

“We’ve shown that local actions can make a difference. Now we must amp them all up,” says Jeff Cogen, Multnomah County commissioner.

On a per-capita basis, greenhouse gas emissions in Multnomah County have fallen 17 percent below 1990 levels, partly on the strength of a 2001 Local Action Plan on Global Warming. But overall emissions are down only 1 percent, because the reductions were offset by population growth.

“Basically, we really didn’t have a strategy,” says Portland Mayor Sam Adams, who has been working closely with Cogen on the new action plan. “The plan did not have a way for us to get everyone involved in reducing their emissions.”

Not so with the new Climate Action Plan, which calls for dozens of actions that residents, businesses and governments can take over 40 years to reduce their carbon footprints. The plan could lead to sweeping changes in transportation, building construction, energy development and other aspects of daily life.

The Portland City Council and Multnomah County Commission are scheduled to adopt the action plan by year’s end, after hearing more public comment.

So far, the plan is getting mixed reviews, especially from business groups.

“I’ve heard people say it’s about halfway there,” says Jim Newcomer of TransitionPDX, a community-based movement that strives to raise local awareness about climate change.

The Portland Business Alliance is raising serious questions, though it hasn’t taken a formal position. “The emission reduction targets are absolute, not relative, so all other values the plan espouses – particularly jobs and economic development – take a secondary position,” notes alliance vice president Bernie Bottomly in a May 8 memo.

The Alliance of Portland Neighborhood Business Associations wonders how the city and county will pay for all the proposed expansions of streetcar lines, bike paths, sidewalks and community garden plots. At a June 15 town hall, the group’s director Jon Torino asked whether the city can even afford the new water lines necessary for more gardens.



L.E. BASKOW / PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP
A MAX train conducts test runs along the new tracks winding down Southwest Fifth Avenue near PSU. The draft 2009 Climate Change Plan calls for more MAX trains, buses, streetcar lines, bike paths, sidewalks and mixed-use developments.

The goals in the plan are based on the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, established by the United Nations in 1988. Its seminal 2007 report concluded that, to minimize climate change, global carbon emissions must peak no later than 2015 and decline 50 percent to 85 percent from 2000 levels by 2050.

“Our goals are consistent with the IPCC recommendations,” Adams says.

Adams and Cogen concede they don’t know how much it will cost to do everything in the plan.

“We’re talking about a long way out – 40 years. At this point it’s not possible to say what the total plan would cost,” Cogen says.

So far, the only specific budget identified in the plan is a \$10 million fund called Clean Energy Works Portland. The program will loan homeowners and business owners money to make energy efficiency improvements at their properties, and let folks pay back the loan via their monthly utility bills. In theory, the energy savings will offset the loan payments. A pilot project is currently under way financed by \$2 million in federal stimulus funds.

Bottomly questions another proposal requiring that energy and consumption ratings be prepared on all buildings in the county. Adams says such assessments are necessary to help business owners understand how to improve their properties.

“This is an unfair intrusion into the private marketplace,” Bottomly says in his memo.

Bottomly also questions another major requirement in the plan – that all future development occur within the urban growth boundary administered by Metro to minimize sprawl. Bottomly argues that will hinder the creation of new jobs.

“The report makes the presumption that all growth, particularly business growth, can take place within the existing boundary without negatively impacting economic development. No supporting documentation or analysis is provided,” he writes.

Adams and Cogen expect the debate to continue until the plan wins final approval from the Portland City Council and Multnomah County Commission this fall.

Citizens may provide public comments on the Climate Action Plan through July 13.

For more information, check the Web site of the Portland Bureau of Sustainability and Planning: www.portlandonline.com/bps/climate

Carbon reductions mean less driving, more trees

The Climate Action Plan was drafted by a steering committee including city and county staff and members of sustainability advisory groups, environmental organizations, TriMet and Metro.

The draft plan calls for sweeping changes over 40 years, including:

- Develop “20-Minute Neighborhoods,” where 90 percent of Portland residents and 80 percent of Multnomah County residents can easily walk or bicycle to meet all basic daily, non-work needs.
- Expand the forest canopy to cover one-third of Portland.
- Reduce per-capita daily vehicle miles driven by 50 percent from 2008 levels.
- Create the most green economy in the world, providing sustainability-oriented jobs for all who want them.
- Encourage local food production — including community gardens.
- Produce 10 percent of total energy used within the county from on-site renewable sources.
- Expand recycling programs to include household and business food waste.

- Reduce the total energy consumed at all existing buildings by 25 percent.
- Achieve zero net greenhouse gas emissions in all buildings and homes built after 2012.
- Increase the average fuel efficiency of local passenger vehicles to 40 miles per gallon.
- Reduce solid waste generated by 25 percent.
- Reduce consumption of carbon-intensive food.
- Reduce carbon emissions from city and county operations 50 percent from 1990 levels.

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